

UNCERTAIN FLAME

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*By the same author*

TENDER ONLY TO ONE  
SHE ACTED ON IMPULSE  
THE MARRIAGE OF MARY CHARD  
MARRIED MAN'S GIRL



# UNCERTAIN FLAME

By  
SUSAN INGLIS

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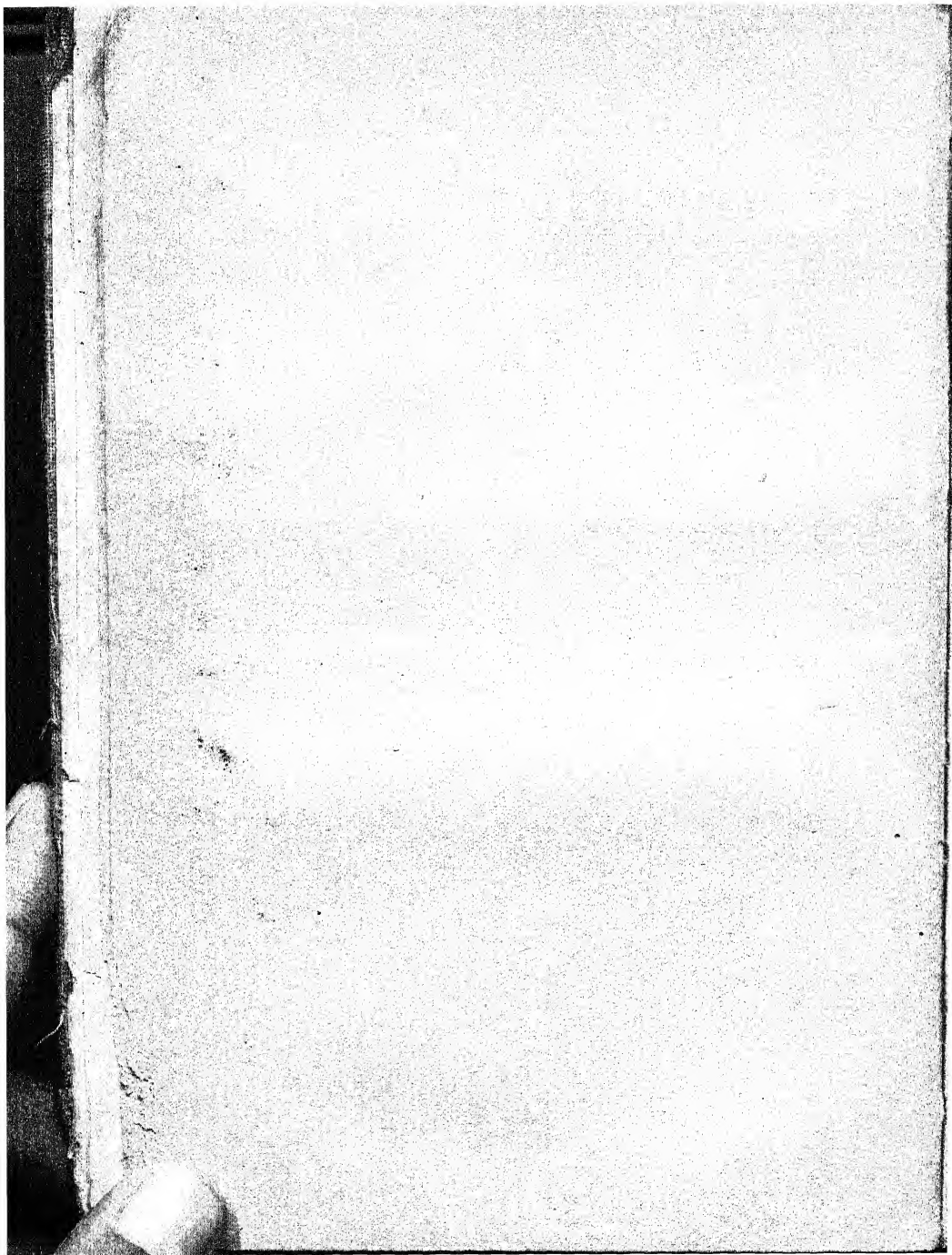
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*The characters in this book are all imaginary  
and have no relation whatsoever to anyone  
bearing the same name.*



## CHAPTER I

### OLYMPIA.

Circus over, and the Fun Fair in full swing. The roar of the Scenic Railway, the crackle of the Dodgem, the shouting of the touts, the shrieks and laughter of the crowd, rising solidly up to the glass roof, to come beating down again, swelling the tumult. A blaze of colour and light, and the queer indefinable smell of circus and Fun Fair combined. Fun, thought Karen Winter happily, thrilling a little to it all.

They had reached Over the Falls by now. Jim said, "Come on—let's have a go at this." Molly giggled and looked at Karen, who shook her head.

"Not for me. I hate those things. You two go along and hold hands—I'll wait for you."

"Oh, but——"

"Go on with you. I'm not here to spoil sport. And besides"—her eye had fallen on a shooting-booth—"I can amuse myself here." And then, as they still hesitated, she added an imperious "Beat it!"

That, of course, Molly reflected a little regretfully, as she and Jim obediently moved off, was Karen all over. She'd go about with you, if you asked her and really meant it, but she was so darned independent.

Jim had wanted to pay for her before they left, but she had seen his hand go to his pocket, and had shooed him away. Molly sighed, and clung a little closer to Jim's arm. She wasn't like Karen. She was glad she'd got Jim.

Left alone, Karen turned to the sloe-eyed damsel behind the counter of the booth. Tossed over her sixpence, and



picked up the loaded gun with a practised hand. Cuddled the stock against her cheek, sighted and fired. . . .

Five shots for your sixpence. Then you wound the handle that brought the target towards you, and saw what you had done. Not too bad. Three bulls and a couple of inners. Crumpling the cardboard, she stuffed it into her coat pocket, and fishing out another sixpence, waited.

The attendant was busy for the moment. Busy with two young men who were laughing and chaffing her. Tall, Saville-Row tailored young men, one dark, and one very fair. The dark one glanced curiously in Karen's direction, and she looked coolly away. She didn't want him to think that she was there to be picked up.

He studied her for a moment longer, interested. Rather tall and slim, with a small, straight nose, and a firm mouth. A hatless head of reddish hair. An old, rather shabby rain-coat, but - his eyes travelled downwards speculatively - neat ankles, and unusually good shoes. Quite self-possessed . . . he wondered idly if she could shoot, and turned back to his companion.

The sloe-eyed damsel liked chaff, but she was there to do business. Catching Karen's eye, she had forsaken the two young men and came quickly over. "Try again, lady?"

The fair young man - he was horribly handsome, Karen decided, and she couldn't help feeling she had seen him somewhere before - was shooting at a target, but the dark one had turned his attention to one of those clusters of tiny balls which dance over a jet of water. Crack . . . that was a miss. Crack . . . that was a hit, and one small ball vanished. Half out of mischief, and half because one quite good target lay in her pocket already, Karen decided that she too would have a shot at the dancing balls. Crack . . .

For some reason she was lucky, though she had never tried them before. When the hammer came down with a dull thud, to tell her that the last of her sixpennyworth had gone, there was one little ball dancing over the jet,

and the sloe-eyed girl was murmuring diplomatic congratulations.

"You're a good shot, lady! Have another?"

But out of the tail of her eye Karen could see Molly and Jim approaching, so she shook her head. Took a swift glance at the dark young man . . . he hadn't been so lucky. There were still three little balls dancing defiantly, untouched by his shots. She moved away contentedly, but not before she had heard his companion's ragging comment:

"Good Lord, Steve! Beaten by a girl!"

Fun, thought Karen, and slipped her arm gaily through Molly's.

"Well, children, what next?"

There wasn't time for much more. Already some of the booths were being swathed in their dust-sheets. The palmist had gone home, and the man at the Caterpillar was bawling: "Last chance! This way, ladies and gentlemen, this way for the last ride to-night!" Almost automatically, the three began to drift towards the exit.

"I've had a lovely evening," Karen said happily. Jim laughed.

"What a kid it is!"

"It is!" she acquiesced promptly. "I adore childish amusements. It was awfully nice of you to bring me along."

She had let him pay for her circus ticket. Partly because he would have been cross and embarrassed if she had argued about the matter. Partly, of course, because she was hard-up, and couldn't really have afforded it for herself. And partly, of course, because he was engaged to Molly, and so might be allowed to do things for Molly's friend every now and then, without serious injury to that independence of hers. She thought now, her glance flickering from him to Molly and back again, they'll be awfully happy. They're so suited to one another. I shall miss Molly like blazes. . . .

No good glooming about that now. It might be ages before they could afford to get married, since Jim wouldn't hear of Molly going on with her job afterwards. And

besides, she had other things to think of. She said abruptly, with a complete change of tone :

"Did Molly tell you, Jim? I've got an appointment to see a man to-morrow. About a job."

"No! That's good."

"I hope it is."

She wasn't too overjoyed, though she ought to have been. Because, whether she liked the sound of the job or not, she'd jolly well got to take it if she could get it. She'd been out of work for nearly a month now, and her savings were dwindling. And she wasn't going to be a burden on Molly. She said :

"It's at Bamfields. The big motor people."

"I know them." Jim sounded impressed. "We do some of their insurances."

Karen left Molly's side, and came to walk beside him instead.

"I've got to see a man called Hallett. Sales Manager. Know him?"

Jim shook his head.

"No. I know the name but not the man. He's fairly new."

"I expect," Karen said gloomily, "that he's some stodgy old horror."

Jim laughed.

"Very unlikely. I did hear that old man Bamfield imported him specially because he was young and bright."

Karen wrinkled her small, straight nose.

"Oh, well, what does it matter, so long as he'll give me the job and pay me a decent salary? I've got to the stage where I ought to thank Heaven on bended knees for any good man who will offer me a weekly pay envelope."

Jim looked mildly distressed.

"Look here, Kay, if it's as bad as that . . ."

She laughed quite blithely, with a complete change of mood. Thrust her arm through his, and pressed it affectionately.

"It's not so bad that I've got to make a touch, old thing! Thank you for thinking of it, all the same."

Jim thought, what an odd girl she is. His glance strayed gratefully, lovingly, to Molly, walking on his other side. Funny that those two should be such friends, when they were so different. Little Molly, all soft and clinging and gentle . . . the sort of girl a man fell in love with. And Karen, with whom you could be on excellent terms, but who never made your pulses beat one fraction faster. . . .

It didn't occur to Jim that there might be other men who would think differently. Men to whom Molly would be just another blonde, while Karen's red head lighted a torch in their minds and hearts. Men to whom the challenge of those clear grey eyes of hers would be irresistible.

He changed the subject, feeling rather as he might if he had been talking to a small boy.

"How was the shooting?"

"Not too bad." She fished the target out of her pocket, and he studied it with amused interest.

"Jolly good."

"I had a shot at those dancing balls, too. Never did it before, but a man was doing it, and I thought I'd try. I beat him——"

And oddly enough, as she looked up, her eyes fell on the man she had just mentioned. His fair companion sat at the wheel of a long, low, red sports car, easing it inch by inch through the huddle of cars and taxis in Addison Road. For a moment, her eyes met his and clashed. Then there was a break in the traffic, and the red car shot ahead.

"Lucky devil!" Karen thought dispassionately, as they went on with the crowd.

With unusual enterprise, Jim disengaged his arm from hers and signalled a taxi.

"The buses are going to be hopeless, with this mob. Hop in, the pair of you."

It wasn't a long ride, once they got clear of the Olympia traffic. Karen lay back contentedly in her corner, thinking

a pleasant, confused medley of thoughts. It had been a nice evening. She adored circuses and Fun Fairs. There was something oddly exciting about the noise and the smell and lights. Something that took you right away from the humdrumness of every day. It had been nice of Jim to ask her with Molly. . . .

Her glance travelled, in the half-darkness, to the other girl, leaning happily against Jim's shoulder, with his arm about her, and she wondered, with the mild wonder that always overtook her when she considered the matter, how they had managed to fall in love, and how they managed to make so prosaic a business of something which should be so - thrilling. She never talked about it to Molly. She didn't want Molly to know that she was, in secret, such a romantic. They were dears, both of them, but . . .

After all, Jim was only an insurance clerk. Possibly opportunities did lie ahead of him, but he never seemed to have much ambition beyond the next rise which was due to him for length of service. And Molly, though she really liked her job in her beauty parlour, was looking forward so eagerly to the day when she could throw it up, and they could marry and settle down.

Karen, untouched as yet by the kindly cruel finger of love, gave herself a little, uncomprehending shake, as the taxi came to a stop.

Leaving Jim to settle with the driver, she ran upstairs, fumbling in her bag for her keys. Left them to follow, slowly. Even if she didn't understand how they could manage to be in love with one another, she could sympathise. When she did go about with the pair of them - and it wasn't very often - she played gooseberry with the maximum of tact.

She had the gas-fire lighted by the time the pair of them came in. The lights switched on, and the curtains drawn. A bowl of rich yellow chrysanthemums on the table shed a golden glow on the polished wood. The room looked homey and inviting, Jim thought enviously, comparing it



with the bleakness of his boarding-house, and dreaming a momentary dream of the day when Molly should make a home for him like this.

Karen was busy at the little sideboard.

"Sit down and have a drink, Jim, before you go. . . ."

He glanced at his watch. At Molly.

"Just one, then, Kay. It's late now, and I'll miss the last bus if I stay too long."

She left them alone together, and went into her bedroom.

## CHAPTER II

FOR SOME REASONS she did not quite understand, she was still thinking of Jim and Molly as she walked along Piccadilly next day, on her way to keep her appointment.

Molly and she had been friends for – how many years was it? Since they had both worked together in an office as junior typists. And then Molly, who hadn't liked office-work much, had found a billet with a beauty specialist, as reception- and counter-clerk, while Karen worked her way up to the status of senior typist, and then secretary. And just as soon as they could jointly afford it, they had moved into the little flat together.

Funny, how they had always got on, even though they looked at life so differently. It had been a bit of a blow when Jim appeared on the scene. All the same, Karen had known that Jim – or someone else – would appear on the scene one day. For Molly had never shared her dreams. Molly had never really enjoyed being independent, though she had always been fiercely fair in her sharing of expenses. She wouldn't be a drag on another girl, but it seemed quite right and natural to her that a man should do her worrying for her, and look after her. She'd be quite ready to exchange the sweets of independence for that.

Was Molly, after all, wiser in what she wanted out of life? Karen couldn't believe it. Not that she had closed her heart to the possibility of romance, but that she couldn't see anything like romance in Jim. So, meantime, she preferred to dream different dreams.

Maybe, some day, she'd find the sort of job that would bring those dreams to reality. A job that would be

interesting, and bring her into contact with interesting people. A job with a salary which would keep her free from worry, and allow her to spread her wings.

She laughed quietly at the idiocy of dreaming, as she walked up the three wide steps that led to the office entrance at Bamfields. The smiling, courteous commissioner took her name, and rang through on a house telephone. A moment later, she was on her way up in the lift, and had already begun to think, quite definitely, I hope I get this job. . . .

There was an atmosphere about the place. An impressive atmosphere. Quiet, and yet at the same time giving the impression of efficiency, of power. The man on the lift, neatly uniformed, neatly groomed, was as quiet and courteous as the commissioner had been. The waiting-room into which she was shown was handsomely furnished and carpeted. There were two or three weekly journals – of that week's date – on the table, and a number of clean, unthumbed car catalogues.

She was too restless to look at any of them. She went to the window instead, and stood looking down at the bustle of the street outside. It seemed almost as if the tempo of her heart-beats quickened to keep time with the bustle.

Then the door opened, suddenly but very quietly, and a pleasant-looking fair-haired girl stood in the doorway.

"Miss Winter? Mr. Hallett is free now. Will you come this way. . . ."

Down a corridor so heavily carpeted that their feet made no sound. To pause outside a door, while the fair-haired girl knocked, and then showed her in. There was a tall, dark young man sitting at the desk – and Karen flushed suddenly, and bit her lip.

It was the man who had been next her last night at the shooting-booth. The man she had beaten. . . .

Seen in the daylight, looking serious and a trifle pre-occupied, he didn't look quite so young. But it was

certainly the same person, and a flush of dismay rose to Karen's cheeks as he raised his head.

Wasn't it the devil's own luck? He'd never engage her, after that silly business at the shooting-booth. Men were so - awkward. He'd be nice and polite, probably, and say nothing about the incident, but the mere fact that they had encountered one another before, even as remotely as they had done, would prejudice him against her. And then she had a glimmer of hope. Maybe - maybe he wouldn't recognise her. She'd been hatless, and dressed in that dreadful old mac.

But he did recognise her. The dark eyes fixed on her face, puzzled at first, and then with dawning recognition. And then, all unexpectedly, he threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. "If it isn't the lady marksman!"

She didn't know what to say. She stood, hesitating, and he motioned to the chair beside his desk.

"Come and sit down," he said cheerfully. "Miss Winter, isn't it? And isn't life full of coincidences!"

She slid into the chair, feeling awkward, and at the same time oddly excited. He certainly wasn't the conventional variety of prospective employer. Perhaps there was still some hope.

He had sobered again, and was studying a small file of papers pinned together. She could see her letter of application on top, and wondered curiously what the rest might be. Then, almost as if he had never recognised her, without any further reference to the incident, he began firing the usual questions at her. She answered quietly, and the flush began to fade from her cheeks. Studying him covertly, she thought, he's very good-looking. . . . I like that quirk of his mouth, and his hands are nice. . . .

And then, quite suddenly, he left routine questions alone. Swung round in his chair, and said, his eyes fixed on her very intently:

"I gather from your experience that you are accustomed to working on your own initiative?" She nodded. "That interested me. Because I don't want a shorthand typing machine. I want a girl who is prepared to use her brains as well as her fingers."

A spark lit in Karen's heart. That sounded as if he were considering her quite seriously. She said, very quietly:

"I've been hoping - very much - that I'd get that sort of post, Mr. Hallett. I'm not - afraid of work - but plain routine is so dull that I'm not very good at it."

"That's honest enough!" he commented, amused, and yet obviously pleased. He sat for a moment or two longer, studying her with that intent look. Then, as if he had taken a sudden decision, he leaned back in his chair, and looked at her with frank friendliness.

"Listen, Miss Winter, I think you'll do. But there's something I want to say to you before we make our final arrangements." He paused a moment, and referred again to the papers on his desk. "As a matter of fact, I telephoned your previous employer before I asked you to come and see me, and he was very emphatic about your discretion."

Thinking of all the state secrets she had carried undisclosed in her head as her last firm drifted slowly, inexorably under her eyes down the slope that led to bankruptcy, Karen nodded.

"I think - I am discreet."

"Well, I'm going to gamble on it. After all, if you come to me you will be my personal secretary, and I believe that a secretary should be fully in one's confidence. I'm going to tell you something you'd probably find out for yourself, anyhow, in less than a week."

His eyes had hardened, and there was a set, determined line to his mouth which for the moment set an almost incredible gulf between the man sitting before her, and the light-hearted young man who had been fooling round in the Fun Fair.



"I've been with this firm for less than five months. The man I succeeded was slow and old-fashioned, and when he retired the managing director took me on in his place because he wanted drastic changes made. I'm going to make those changes - but I am badly hampered by the fact that the entire staff here resents my appointment. It's none of their business, of course, but they all think that the job ought to have gone to the head salesman - a man called Gage. He's a good enough fellow, and I've had no difficulty with him. His only trouble was that he had worked so long with the other man that Mr. Bamfield did not think he could bring about the necessary changes. But the rest of the staff——"

Hallett hesitated, and then his hand came down on his desk with a thud of exasperation.

"It's very loyal of them, of course," he said, with an appealingly rueful grin, "but they seem to forget that Bamfields pay them their wages. And their attitude has made things very difficult for me. They don't defy me openly, you understand - I could cope with that - but they are passively difficult, and I have to overcome that before I can get a move on. That's why I got rid of the old man's secretary - she was the worst of the lot. I could get rid of the whole boiling, but I don't want to do it. But - I must have one or two people who are really with me, absurd as it may seem to put it that way. If you come here, I shall expect you to be whole-heartedly on my side. Another thing, of course, is the fact that you will probably share my unpopularity. Now, what do you think about all that?"

Karen's eyes were shining. This was adventure! She looked him straight in the face.

"Only this," she said, "that if you give me the job, I shall do my utmost" - she nearly said darnedest, but swallowed the word in time - "to do what you want."

She was thinking again, as she had thought at the Fun Fair last night, fun! Fun to take on a bit of a fight, with someone young and alive and human.

Hallett smiled approvingly, and his face became younger again.

"Fine," he said. "It won't be all jam — though you can rely on my backing. But if you can tackle a bit of unpleasantness and keep your head . . . if you don't mind responsibility — for I shall have to leave a lot in your hands when I'm not here——"

She was glowing now.

"I shall love it!" she said honestly, proudly.

When she had started out this morning she had never dreamed of anything like this happening. She'd thought she might get the job, if she were lucky, and that it needn't prove more boring than jobs usually were, but this——

"We'll try it then, shall we? Suppose we say a month's trial to start with. Then we shall know what we think of one another, and what you think of the job. At four-ten a week — you knew that was the salary I was offering? Good."

He pressed a button on his desk and waited. The fair-haired girl who had shown Karen in appeared again.

"Miss Rowson, this is Miss Winter, who starts here — when?" Hallett looked interrogatively at Karen.

"To-morrow?" she suggested promptly. He nodded, pleased.

"To-morrow morning at nine-thirty. You might look after her, show her her room, and see that she has everything she requires. That's all, thank you."

The fair-haired girl had smiled amiably enough at Karen, but she seemed to have nothing to say. With a meek "Yes, Mr. Hallett," she turned and was gone again. He turned back to Karen.

"That's one of my biggest nuisances. She's been here since the flood as head filing and post clerk, and that's about the limit of her capabilities. Because things have always been done a certain way, it's almost impossible to make her understand that they can be done in any other. And I

can't cope with women who weep. That'll be part of your job!"

He grinned, flicking open his cigarette-case, and taking one out, half held it out to her, and then drew it back.

"I suppose that's the sort of thing I shouldn't do!"

"You certainly shouldn't!" Karen confirmed, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

"I hate shouldn'ts!" he said abruptly. "Loathe banging my head against brick walls. I'm afraid you're going to find me a funny person to work for, Miss Winter. My pet abomination is red tape, and this concern is so old-established that it's fairly swaddled in the stuff. I'm going to get rid of it, but I suppose I've got to go slowly." He paused, and grinned again, an attractive, lop-sided grin. "I'm going to sell cars, though, and that's all that matters. Send the sales graph rising, and old Bamfield will give me the earth."

There was a moment's silence. Karen hardly knew how to answer. Then he spoke again, still with that amused look in his eyes.

"Funny, you know, my seeing you last night. Cool as a cucumber, all by yourself, and a look in your eye that would discourage any ambitious young man." He laughed outright. "Ian Foster - that's the man who was with me - wanted to drift along after you, and I told him he'd be wasting his time. . . ."

Ian Foster . . . she'd thought she knew his face. Ian Foster, rising British film star. Exciting! Her eyes widened, and she laughed back at Hallett.

"I'm afraid he would!" she returned frankly. "Much as I like his pictures."

"He's a good chap, though. You'll see a lot of him here. He's one of my best customers, as well as one of my oldest friends. He'll be very amused when he hears about you. . . ."

The telephone rang sharply, and he broke off to pick it up. His easy manner was gone. He answered crisply, directly.

"Mr. Wilson? Yes, ask him to come up. I'm free now. . . ."

Setting down the receiver, he turned and held out his hand. The laughter had vanished from his eyes, though the whimsical quirk remained at the corners of his mouth.

"Well, I'll see you to-morrow. And you'll come prepared for squalls!"

"I will!" she promised. He turned back to his desk and the many matters waiting for his attention, and she slipped out of the room.

. . . . .

Ignoring the lift, Karen sped down the stairs, her heart pounding with excitement. She'd got the job. The salary was quite good. And the job itself was going to be *fun*. . . .

She was so deeply lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice the man who came running up the steps from the street until he had pushed the swing-door open in front of her, missing her nose by a couple of inches. Then she looked up, half startled, half annoyed.

"I'm terribly sorry——"

Not the sort of young man you could be really annoyed with, Karen realised swiftly, with a brief glance at a plain, rather pleasant face, a pair of friendly blue eyes, and an apologetic grin.

"My fault!" she conceded. "I wasn't looking."

And then, while he held the door open for her, she had passed through into the noise of the street. Oblivious of the fact that he stood staring after her in an absent-minded way, until she was lost from sight in the crowds on the pavement.

Upstairs, Steven Hallett paused for a moment, as he waited for his caller to be shown in. Tapped his pencil thoughtfully on the desk. Grinned his beguiling grin.

Maybe he'd been a little rash in telling the girl so much, but he didn't think so. He thought, actually, that he had made a wise move.

### CHAPTER III

KAREN WALKED ALONG with the oddest kind of jubilation in her heart. As if something momentous had happened. Something more than just the getting of a job. As if a tiny corner of the curtain hiding the future had flicked back for a second, giving her an instant's glimpse of something exciting.

Because, hitherto, life had been rather dull.

That, of course, she told herself, was largely her own fault. If she could have looked at things as Molly did, she would have found them much more enjoyable. A pair of new curtains for the flat thrilled Molly. She found her job quite amusing and pleasant, and the annoyances of it slid easily by her. And then, of course, Jim was — probably always would be — an enormous thrill to her.

The same sort of things happened to Karen, but she couldn't work up any enthusiasm over them. She was so conscious that there were other things in the world — lovely, thrilling, maybe even dangerous — which never came her way, and didn't seem to have any place in the scheme of life as it affected her. She could, she knew without vanity, in all probability have had a young man like Jim — they knew plenty of young men, the two girls — but —

Get a thrill out of him? Never! She thought sometimes that Molly didn't know what a real thrill was. Didn't dream how your pulses could drum, and the blood in every one of your veins tingle, and your breath shorten —

Karen gave a short laugh, all to herself, in the middle of Piccadilly. She was being idiotic again. She didn't know



anything about that sort of thrill either. She only knew, firmly, deeply, in her heart, that it did exist.

She went back in her mind to Molly. She'd be frightfully glad to know that Karen had got a job again. Karen began to dally with the idea of going round to see her at the beauty parlour before she went back to the flat. If she went — she could tell Molly that much sooner. Besides . . .

Probably, if they weren't too busy, Molly could fix it up for her to have a manicure. And well-groomed hands gave you such confidence. Coming to her decision in a flash, Karen swung round, and retraced her steps.

She was thinking, planning, as she walked up Bond Street. The thought of hands led on to other things. Dare she——

After all, she decided, telling herself that she was only being sensible, it wasn't a matter of daring. It was common sense. Sheer efficiency. It would be so much cleverer of her to turn up at Bamfields for her first day's work decently dressed, and she hadn't really a single frock that gave her that lovely sensation of finish that every woman knows.

She could afford it, too, without being foolish, now that she was sure of four pounds ten a week for at least a month . . . and it was only super-caution which reminded her of that month's limitations. Her small chin went unconsciously into the air. If she couldn't hold that job down, *nobody* could hold it down, she told herself defiantly.

But, nails first.

Fortunately the salon was empty. Molly looked up from her place behind the counter as Karen walked in, and the question that flashed to her eyes vanished instantly as she saw her friend's face.

"You've got it, then!"

"Got it — and that's not the half of it. I think I'm going to love it, but I'll tell you all about it to-night. I just popped in to let you know, and see if you could fix me up with a manicure. I'm starting to-morrow, and I want to be on top of my form!"

Molly looked contentedly at Karen's dancing eyes. Nodded.

"I think I can. We're not busy. I'll just ask madam, and then get hold of one of the girls for you. I'm terribly glad, Kay!"

She slipped away for a moment. Vanished behind the heavy hangings of rose velvet that divided the shop from the cubicles, and reappeared, nodding her head.

"O.K. *This* way, please, madam. Number seven!"

"Thanks awfully. You're a saint!"

Kay was thinking, rather obscurely, as she walked along the tiny white and gold and rose corridor. . . . I'm sure he'll notice. . . . I'm sure he knows when women are well-groomed. . . . and you ought to be smart, in a place like Bamfields. . . .

Number seven cubicle was already occupied by Louise, slim and blonde and exquisite in her severe white overall. She nodded cheerfully to Karen, whom she had met before.

"You're a lamb!" Karen said gratefully, as she sat down in the waiting chair and stripped off her gloves. "I'm starting a new job to-morrow."

"That's fine," Louise commented. "And we're not a bit busy. Too early. Most of our clients don't poke their little noses out of bed before midday."

Karen leaned back comfortably. Dabbled her fingers luxuriously in the warm, scented, soapy water. Pretending, just for a moment, that she wasn't just a working girl, to whom another working girl was doing a favour, but a woman of the world, rich, leisured. The sort of woman who could stroll into a place like this and order the whole works, without troubling about the cost. Louise worked dexterously away.

"You've got nice hands," she said approvingly. "Nice to do. So few people have."

"I suppose faces are worse?" Karen asked, almost idly. Louise nodded agreement.

"I'll say they are! Young ones - you can usually do something with them. Some old ones, too. In fact, the

infuriating thing is that there's hardly a face in the world that you can't do something for, if only the owner will help you. But," she was pressing back the skin now, "they don't. They're late, night after night, and I'll swear that some of them go to bed in their clothes as well as their make-up. They drink too much, and they eat too much, and then they suddenly wear themselves to skeletons, trying to slim. And then they bring their faces in here and expect you to work miracles."

"What do you do?" Karen asked, amused.

"Cover the wreck with make up, and tell madam she looks marvellous!" Louise returned cynically.

She was busy with the cuticle knife now, trimming rough edges. She paused for an instant as a woman's rather imperious voice sounded in the corridor outside. Smiled impishly as she recognised it.

"Well, you've saved me from something! Sadie gets my prize packet, and she's welcome to her tip! She'll earn it."

The owner of the voice had gone into number six, and her complaints could be heard through the partition.

"That's one of the sort I was talking about a moment ago," Louise remarked, in a discreet whisper, "Mrs. Lucilla Sandle. Heard of her?"

Karen nodded. Who hadn't? Lucilla Sandle, widow of Sandle's Breweries. Lucilla Sandle, owner of racehorses. Lucilla Sandle, who had been one of the first women in England to buy an aeroplane of her own, and who invariably employed the youngest, most dashing of pilots. Lucilla, whose dark beauty stared at you boldly from the pages of the society weeklies, and whose doings were rarely absent from the jottings of Society scribblers. . . .

In spite of herself, Karen felt mildly thrilled to know that Lucilla Sandle was occupying the next cubicle. She glanced up and met Louise's cynical smile.

"I gather - you don't like her?"

"I don't." Louise shook her head. "She must be forty

if she's a day, and she expects us to make her look twenty. She's always got some young man in tow. Any young man in the limelight. Haxen, the racing motorist was the last. Now it's a lad on the films. Heaven knows what next."

She was putting on nail varnish now. Clear, pale, natural colour. Karen watched, admiring the deftness, the sureness of the hands which held the brush.

"There," Louise said, satisfied, when she had finished, "there's a nice job for you. Pity we can't put on some of our fancy colours, and put your hands in the window!"

Kay held them out admiringly. They were nice, even if they were her own. She turned impulsively to Louise.

"You're a brick! They're a lovely job, and I'm frightfully grateful." She hesitated a moment, and then added, "You're coming along to see us some evening, aren't you? Molly said she was going to bring you along."

"I'd love to," Louise told her sincerely. "People think that if you work in a beauty parlour, your private life's all cocktail parties and whoopee! They'd get a grand laugh if they saw me going back to my bachelor apartment four nights out of the seven, and taking evening classes the other three."

Something in her voice stirred Karen's curiosity. Almost unconsciously, she blurted out,

"Evening classes?"

Louise nodded.

"Yes. I want to open a place of my own one of these days, and there's a whole lot more I want to know before I do it."

A pair of steady blue eyes smiled at Karen from beneath the curling lashes. Karen thought, with a sudden jag of friendliness . . . she's my sort. . . .

"Well - some evening you haven't a class——" she said, and took her departure.

The shop was empty again as she passed through, so she paused for another word with Molly, showing her hands.

"Listen," the other girl said quickly, "let's celebrate your new job. I'll ring Jim——"

Karen nodded quickly.

"Yes — tell him to come along to dinner to-night, and I'll do you proud. It'll probably be the last chance I get for ages — I never even thought of asking when Bamfields closes, but it looks as if I might have to work late, to start with, anyway."

"You're sure?" Molly hesitated. "You wouldn't rather go out?"

"I wouldn't!" Karen said bluntly. "Jim took me out last night. This is my party!"

"All right, then . . ."

That independence of Karen's again! The chromium door swung open to admit two lavishly furred, lavishly scented ladies. Karen nodded good-bye, and made her escape.

Her mind was busy with calculations as she walked towards Piccadilly again, and although she knew it was futile, she glanced with more than casual interest into the shop windows as she passed. One brought her to an involuntary stop.

That was the frock she wanted. . . . Lovely, soft wool, in a queer shade that was neither green nor blue, with clever sleeves, and a slim, beguiling line.

She sighed. The darn thing probably cost the earth. Just for a moment, her mind played with fantastic calculations . . . she had four pounds in her pocket, and ten more left in the savings bank. . . . With bitter common sense, she pulled herself together and walked on.

One of these days, she was vowing fiercely, she'd be able to go into shops like that, and try on unpriced frocks. One of these days, she'd be earning enough.

Without a thought that one of these days she might have a husband's bank account to draw on, she swung herself on a 25 bus that stopped opportunely in a traffic jam. Karen's mind didn't work on those lines. She had already gone



forward, in thought, to the little shop in Victoria where you could so often find little frocks that were clever enough, in their own way, and didn't – cost the earth.

She was lucky, and she found it. Soft wool, and with a new, smart touch to it. A clear, unmistakable green – but you didn't find those really different colours in frocks at forty-five shillings. For a minute or two, looking at herself in the long mirror, she really loved it. But she thought, as she walked away, the carrier swinging from her finger, that she wouldn't go back to Bond Street for a week or two, until there was every chance that *the* frock, if not sold, was certainly out of the window.

A few other bits of shopping, and she was through. Steak to grill for dinner, some mushrooms, a tin of tomato soup and some extra milk . . . she didn't really enjoy domesticity, but she knew that Jim enjoyed a decent meal, and she liked the thought of being able to do something for him in return for his kindness to her. A couple of bottles of beer, and some freshly ground coffee, and she mounted the stairs to the flat, heavily laden, but somehow content. Life, which had been out of gear, was moving again. With the hint that it might move faster, more gaily . . . she sang, gaily and quite out of tune, as she peeled the mushrooms.

Dinner was a success. She wore the new frock – partly because she wanted to know what Molly and Jim thought of it, partly because she didn't want it to feel too unfamiliar the following day. A huge overall – the girls' joint property – covered it while she carried trays and did the washing up. It wasn't till they reached coffee time, and she was leaning back in her chair, watching the smoke from her cigarette drift towards the fireplace, that she told them all the details of her conversation with Steven Hallett.

Molly looked troubled. Jim was outspoken.

"I don't like the sound of it," he said, shaking a cautious head. Molly chimed in.

"I think it'll be awful! Fancy knowing that everyone

in the place is going to be up against you from the moment you get there."

Impatiently, Karen flicked ash.

"Not everybody. Provided that I can satisfy Mr. Hallett, that's all that matters."

"Maybe," Jim agreed, "but - it seems funny that he should tell you, just like that. I mean to say - he doesn't know anything about you, really. And, anyway, I think it's a nerve to expect a girl to take on that sort of thing. He sounds a funny cuss to me."

Karen glanced at him with stormy eyes, and then laughed, quite unexpectedly. After all, she was telling herself, that's just the way you would expect Molly and Jim to look at a thing like this. They couldn't understand that there was something exciting in it all. They only thought it might be awkward and difficult.

And, naturally, Steven Hallett would sound like a funny cuss to Jim. . . .

Thank Heaven, she concluded swiftly, that he *wasn't* cut from Jim's pattern !

## CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DAY which Karen spent at Bamfields produced small but significant signs of the state of affairs. Before she had been there a week she had realised that Steven Hallett had exaggerated not one whit when he described it to her.

He was intensely unpopular with the whole staff. Hardly one of them did not go out of his or her way to be awkward - civilly but effectively. Not one of them liked him, or showed the least sign of trying to work for him with any good will. Except, of course, Barry Gage.

She'd been rather curious about Barry Gage. Ready to dislike him furiously. Ready to believe that for all Steven's assurance that Mr. Gage had behaved well, he was really and secretly at the bottom of the whole trouble, egging and inciting the rest of them on. And then she discovered that Barry Gage was the young man who had rushed up the stairs as she came down them, and her preconceived notion had wavered. By the end of the week, it was dead entirely.

You couldn't, unless you were completely devoid of any sense of humour, of any instinct about people, fit Barry Gage into such a melodramatic rôle. You couldn't, either, help liking him far too much.

He wasn't, of course, exciting, as Steven Hallett was exciting. He was quieter, without the flashes of brilliance which stirred you to admiring the other man. But he was clever enough in his own way, and so kindly, so considerate, that it was nearly as pleasant working for him as for the Sales Manager, if in a very different way.

She had found that it was part of her job to do his letters as well as Steven Hallett's. Had found, too, that while the office staff and the rest of the salesmen, not to mention the very car-cleaners and the commissionaire at the door, regarded her with a certain veiled suspicion, because she was Steven Hallett's first importation, and showed very little disposition to be helpful, Barry Gage was a tower of strength. That he alone had no undertones in his voice when he spoke of Hallett, and was always entirely correct in his attitude. That he alone seemed to feel no resentment against Hallett for occupying the shoes which might so well have been his own.

There were moments when she thought - he's rather like Jim. Only, of course, bigger. . . . Rather a neat summary of the figure which Barry Gage cut in her eyes.

She didn't think much about him, though. There wasn't really room in her mind for anyone else but Steven Hallett.

He worked, she found, like a demon. Worked her mercilessly, too. Instead of resenting it, she adored it. Returning from a demonstration run, some time after seven, after she had been with the firm about ten days, Barry Gage found her still in her little room - it opened off Hallett's - typing away for dear life. He stood in the doorway, staring at her with a sort of disapproving astonishment.

"Good heavens!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She raised a flushed face - more tired than she knew - from her typewriter.

"Finishing up."

"Couldn't you have left it till the morning?"

She shook her head.

"No. Besides, I don't mind."

"But," he persisted, "Hallett's gone, hasn't he? Those letters won't be signed till the morning, anyhow."

"They will!" she flashed triumphantly. "He's coming back." She threw a swift glance at the clock. "At half past seven, he said, and I'm nearly done."

realised——” With a sudden impulse, he turned back to her. “Look here, get those letters ready, and then come out and have a snack with me. You must be hungry.”

A stab of sheer disappointment shot through Karen. Why – why – why – had she said she’d go out with Barry Gage? She’d never dreamed—— She had a sudden, overwhelming urge to say yes, to slip out and apologise to Barry, to explain. And then she fought it down. No matter how badly she wanted to do it, she couldn’t. Steadily, regretfully, she said :

“ I’m so sorry – it’s awfully nice of you to think of me – but Mr. Gage came in a moment ago, and he’s just offered to give me some dinner, too. I said I’d go——”

“ Gage, eh ? ” The dark eyebrows shot up, and Hallett studied her curiously for a moment, half frowning. Then he smiled again.

“ That’s all right, then – so long as you’re taken care of. Good night, Miss Winter ! ”

He nodded and was gone, leaving Karen alone and bitterly, unreasonably, unhappy. How maddening life was. . . .

It would have been so – marvellous – to go out with Steven Hallett for that snack. It was so awful to have to say no, when something so utterly exciting was offered you, especially as she couldn’t help feeling that he’d been a trifle annoyed, when she did say no. That was absurd, of course ; it couldn’t really matter to him, though it mattered, so hideously and abominably to her.

She picked up the letters, and moved slowly towards the dividing door. Stopped, furious to find that tears – tears – were swelling up in her eyes.

“ I’m tired,” she told herself desperately ; “ I’m crazy ! It’s just that – just——”

Ah – why try to fool yourself, Karen Winter, when you know quite well what’s the matter ? That you’re madly, crashingly in love with a man you’d never set eyes on a



fortnight before – a man who's never in the least likely to take the slightest interest – that sort of interest – in you?

It wasn't easy, after that blinding discovery, to go out with Barry Gage, and behave as decently as his kindness deserved.

When she had put on her coat and hat, and turned to him silently with the letters clasped in her hand, he slipped his under her arm. Not in a way that – meant anything. Rather big-brotherly. And when he got her down into the street, he called "Taxi."

"Quiet for you, my girl," he said, "no bright lights, and no music. A spot of good food, and then Uncle Barry will take you right home."

She said, looking down at the hand which still held the letters: "I've got to post these."

"Right you are," he agreed, and, sliding back the little window behind the driver, told the man to detour by a post-office. There, he took the handful of envelopes, and slid them through the slit.

"Now then, conscience clear?" he asked. She nodded faintly. He was awfully nice, but——

Why should it be – dust and ashes – to be riding out in a taxi with Barry Gage, towards good food? Why must Steven Hallett's dark eyes and whimsical mouth dance in front of her in the flicker of lights that slid through the cab?

She pulled herself together when they reached Alessandro's. She'd heard of it, of course, though she had never been there. If you were a Londoner at all, you knew about Alessandro's. In spite of the misery that nagged at her heart, she glanced curiously up at the dowdy, old-fashioned entrance, at the plushiness of the place. At the waiters bustling to and fro, and the stout, beaming Italian who came to meet them, and who obviously knew Barry Gage very well indeed.

Where would Steven Hallett have taken her? Where

was he now? And had he really been annoyed when she said she was going with Barry Gage? And, if so, just why had he been annoyed?

She came back to the present to look at the menu, written in violet ink in a sprawling hand. Barry Gage's keen eyes were on her face.

"Soup, I think," he said. "Yes - very reviving. What then?"

"What are you going to have?" she asked, and he nodded understandingly.

"Want me to choose? Then, I'd say a tournedos - a squarish sort of meal is what you want. And then——"

"No sweet." She shook her head. He smiled.

"I rather thought you were that sort of woman. Savoury?"

"No, thanks. Just coffee, if I may."

The soup was clear, and looked almost insipid, but it had that reviving quality that a really good clear soup should have. Karen's weariness was leaving her, though the empty sensation still hung round her heart. Barry talked on, lightly, about nothing in particular, and at last she managed to look up into his face with the beginning of a smile. He leaned forward immediately.

"That's better. Look here, Miss Winter, I want to lecture you for your own good!"

Her smile faded.

"Don't overdo things!" he said earnestly. "I know - you've been working late every night since you came to Bamfields. You've got to be sensible. You'll only knock yourself up, if you go on the way you're doing." And then, before she could protest or argue, he spiked her guns very neatly: "You'll be ill, then, and you won't be helping anyone."

"Maybe you're right," she said. He was, of course, only half way right. She could have gone on working late, night after night, and felt it very little. She wouldn't have been like this to-night, if it hadn't been for the sudden revelation

that had struck her, like a tornado, as she stood in Steven Hallett's room, and watched the faint frown that met her remark that Barry Gage was taking her out to dinner. When you've never been up against anything of the sort before, it is rather shattering to realise, all of a sudden, that you've fallen in love.

"I know I'm right," Barry Gage asserted. She didn't know how keenly, how kindly, those blue eyes of his had been studying her, while she was lost in the confusion of her own thoughts. Or how Barry himself was aware of a faint sensation of surprise at the very vehemence of his feeling that Hallett's new little secretary mustn't be allowed to fag herself out. She only knew that he was being very kind, and very thoughtful, and that she wasn't anything like as grateful as she ought to have been, and that it wasn't - any of it - in the least his fault. She managed to smile again, a faint, appealing smile.

"Don't bully me!" she begged, and his earnest expression relaxed.

"All right," he agreed. "Lecture over for to-night!"

She did feel worlds better by the time they had finished dinner, and were lingering over the good black coffee with which one finished a meal at Alessandro's. She sipped the Benedictine on which Barry had insisted, feeling a great deal more alive than the girl who had walked into the place an hour ago. She began to talk a little - she had been very silent hitherto - and to ask Barry Gage things she wanted to know about Barnfields - things she had come across in her brief spell there, without understanding, things she wanted to understand. As if he were mildly surprised, but wanted to humour her, Barry Gage explained.

Her heart heaviness was passing over a little. She thought, tense and breathless for one unconscious moment ... I'm making an awful fuss about nothing. Why shouldn't he - ask me again? She said, gratefully, to Barry, her tongue, perhaps, a little loosened by the Benedictine and the good red wine which had preceded it:

"You know, Mr. Gage, you've been awfully good to me. I - don't want to grumble - but it isn't easy, my job."

"I'm sure it isn't," he agreed amiably. "I've been lecturing you on the subject."

She brushed that aside.

"That isn't what I meant. It's - everyone's so up against Mr. Hallett——"

She had blurted the words out, hot partisanship echoing in her voice, and the sentence hung in mid-air between them. Barry Gage was looking straight at her, but a veil seemed to have come over his face. Karen added, struck by sudden thought:

"I don't mean - you - but everyone else——"

Again silence, and it was uncomfortable this time. Then, at last he spoke.

"Don't you think - you're making a mountain out of a molehill?"

"I'm not!" she insisted.

"In any case," he added quietly, "if you'll forgive my saying so - is it any of your business? You've been with the firm something like ten days, Miss Winter. Don't you think you'd better wait a little longer before you start trying to - reorganise it?"

The words were like a slap in the face. To her anger, she realised that tears were coming, stinging, to her eyes.

"Oh——" she said. "I - I did think you'd understand! If you knew how difficult it makes everything for me——"

She was hedging, of course. It wasn't for her own sake that she was so desperately keen on enlisting his help. It would make life easier, of course, if the thing could be straightened out, but she had thrown herself so wholeheartedly into the battle on Steven Hallett's account that she was thinking only of him at the moment.

"If," Barry Gage suggested, rather stiffly, "you find - anyone deliberately unhelpful, you can always complain to Mr. Hallett. He is, after all, the manager."

"I can't!" she flashed hotly. "It's all so petty that

I couldn't worry him with it. And he couldn't take any notice of it if I did."

Gage's next words were a stiffer slap still.

"But you think I could do something? In other words, you think I'm responsible for - some foolish conduct on the part of some of the staff?"

Karen flushed crimson. She'd been a fool, of course, ever to bring the subject up, and with every word she seemed to get deeper and deeper into the mire. She'd been abominably, incredibly clumsy. Looking up, she met his blue eyes - they were almost grey now with something like anger - steadily.

"I don't!" she said earnestly. "You must see that I don't! I couldn't talk to you like this if I did. It's only - you're the only person I thought might be able to help *me*——"

The slight stress on the last word didn't escape him. He leaned forward, his eyes kinder.

"Listen, Miss Winter," he said quietly, "if there were anything I could do to help *you*" - and he stressed the word in his turn - "it should be done. But you are talking about something over which I have no control whatever."

He paused for a moment, and then went on:

"I'm not going to fence with you. I know as well as you do that there is a certain amount of feeling in the office. There often is, when changes take place. But I am quite sure that, if it is disregarded, it will settle down. And the best advice I can give you is to disregard it, and let Steven Hallett fight his own battles."

A trace of hardness had come back to his face with his last words. He sat looking at her, unsmiling, inscrutable, till her eyes dropped, and something very like hatred welled up in her heart, that was, in the end, mainly hurt vanity. He'd snubbed her. Put her well and truly in her place. For a furious moment she wished that she hadn't just eaten his dinner. That she could tell him just what she thought



of him and march off. Almost as if he had read her thought, he smiled faintly.

"I expect I'm very unpopular? And it won't help matters to tell you that it was for your own sake that I spoke? Let's forget it all for to-night, anyhow, and perhaps you'll feel better about it in the morning."

To her own astonishment, Karen found her dislike evaporating. She was still angry with him, of course, but you couldn't really dislike someone as kind and considerate as Barry Gage.

They didn't come back to the subject till they were in the taxi on the way home. Then, unexpectedly, Barry Gage stretched out a big hand and laid it over hers.

"You don't - think me an utter brute?" he asked, with an amazing humility in his voice. Karen shook her head in the darkness.

"No," she said, "you've been very good, really."

"Because," he added, "I'd do anything - anything I possibly could for you. . . ."

Except the one thing I want you to do! she thought resentfully. But they were home by now, and he stood, bareheaded, until she was inside the front door of the flats.

## CHAPTER V

SHE WAS VAGUELY IRRITATED when she got upstairs to find that Jim was there, spending the evening with Molly. It was a good thing, in a way, for it would prevent her making any impulsive revelations, but, on the other hand, it did mean that she had to pull herself together and be sociable, when she wasn't feeling at all like it.

The very sight of them, too, was annoying. Molly sat on one side of the fire, hands busy with knitting needles, while Jim lounged on the other, pipe in mouth. As domesticated and tame as if they'd been married ten years, thought Karen.

Molly looked up as the other girl walked in, and a flicker of relief crossed her face.

"Hullo! You're late. I was almost getting worried."

"It's all right," Karen assured her. "I was late at the office, and then Mr. Gage gave me some dinner."

"Started vamping them already?" Jim grinned. To her own surprise Karen caught herself in the act of snapping back at him. Controlled herself, and forced a smile instead.

"Just that."

"Where did you go?"

"Alessandro's."

"Lovely!" said Molly placidly. "Was it nice?"

"Awfully nice. Except that I was so darn tired."

"Poor lamb."

"Mustn't overdo things, Kay," Jim said paternally. "You'll be getting your nerves in a mess if you do."

"I'm going to make up for it by going straight to bed," she assured him. "I don't have to put on party manners with you, Jim, do I?"

"You certainly don't!" he returned, and:

"Like a hot drink in bed?" Molly asked.

"Not after the dinner I've had," Kay told her. "Night-night, the pair of you. . . ."

After all, it was best to escape, even if she knew quite well that she might jump into bed at once without getting to sleep. She was caught up in too strange, too sudden a turmoil for that.

She pulled her hat off, and sat down in front of her looking-glass. Willy nilly, her thoughts flew back to Steven Hallett, and that moment of blinding revelation in his office.

So this was — what love was like. . . .

Her thoughts flickered back to Molly and Jim. Was she crazy, and was love something — oh, something less quickening to the blood, but something calmer, surer, safer? A matter of give and take. Not a breathlessness that swept you right off your feet simply because a man had dark, laughing eyes, and left you heedless whether he knew or cared what he had done to you?

No, that was wrong. Not heedless. Powerless, perhaps. But you couldn't help knowing — realising, in a way that sent little stabs of sheer agony through all your veins — what a difference it would make if he did know. If only — only — only — he felt the same.

Starry eyes stared at her out of the mirror. It wouldn't make any difference to what she felt, of course. Whether he cared or didn't care, she couldn't help feeling like this about Steven Hallett. But if there were even the faintest little hope that he might——

Her heart jumped in her breast, and her mouth grew very tender. "Oh, my dear, my dear——" she said to herself, very low. "My dear . . ."

As if she could not bear to sit still, she rose and began mechanically to hang up her coat and her hat. Loosened

the tie at the neck of her dress, and the belt, and slipped out of it, to stand, slimly curved, in a pale green slip. Dreamed for a moment or two longer, and then forced herself to go on with her undressing. She was nearly ready for bed when the closing of a door announced that Jim had gone, and Molly came to knock at her door.

"Not in bed yet?" she was faintly surprised. Karen realised that she had been wrapt up with her thoughts for a long time.

"No. I've been fussing about."

Molly was eyeing her closely.

"You're not - upset about anything?"

"Lord, no."

She noticed what she had been too preoccupied to notice before, that there was a sort of glow of happiness about the other girl. A tenderness about the mouth - though she could not have told that it was nothing like the tenderness which had lingered about her own a little while before. Only a very dispassionate onlooker could have seen the hunger in Karen, the content in Molly.

"You look - very pleased about something," she said.

"What's up, Molly?"

"Jim's got his rise!" Molly told her triumphantly.

"Starting next month."

"Well!" This had really jerked her thoughts away from her own concerns with a vengeance. They'd all talked so much, thought so much, about Jim's rise, that it seemed to belong inexorably to the future. And now the future was only a month away.

"Then——"

Molly nodded.

"Yes."

No need to specify what "Then" and "Yes" meant. Karen knew well enough what was going to happen when Jim got his rise. She'd considered the prospect often enough. Was shocked to find how its sudden approach

left her with a strange sensation of desolation. For Molly's sake, though, she had to be glad.

"Darling, that's marvellous! And gosh, Molly, how I'm going to miss you."

The happiness in the other girl's eyes clouded a trifle.

"I know. I hate the thought of it. Anyhow," she added, "we shan't actually be getting married for a while longer. Maybe we'll wait till the summer, and have our honeymoon when Jim gets his holiday. There's an awful lot to be done. We've got to find a place to live, and all that."

Karen nodded. She'd thought the thing over often enough, and wondered vaguely what she would do when Molly got married. And then she'd pushed the unwelcome thought into the back of her mind. Time enough to worry about it when it happened. Now it was going to happen . . . what was it going to mean to her?

Not only that she'd miss Molly, and be horribly lonely without her. She'd probably have to give up the flat. She couldn't afford to keep it on by herself. And that would mean - what? Going back into a bed-sitting-room, the sort of thing she had had before they teamed up together.

She pushed that thought, too, into the back of her mind. Time to worry about that when she'd got to do it. Meanwhile, this was Molly's moment, not hers. She slipped her arm round the other girl's shoulders.

"I'm a selfish cat, thinking about myself, Moll. And you know I'm really glad, for your sake, and Jim's. I expect he's like a pup with two tails."

Molly nodded, bright-eyed.

"It's been a long time," she said. Karen thought swiftly, so it had. They'd been engaged for what - two years? Suddenly clear-eyed on what those two years must have meant, she looked down at Molly with a vague sort of wonder. They'd been in love with one another all that time, and they'd been content to wait.



She gave Molly a hug.

"You've been a model of patience," she said. "Now you can get all worked up about wedding dresses and new flats and table silver—you're going to love it, Molly!"

"I am!" Molly said softly, but whole-heartedly, as she took herself off.

. . . . .

I am perfectly ridiculous, Karen told herself, as she sat in the tube on the way to the office next morning. There's no sense thinking about Molly, and then thinking about myself.

More keenly than ever before she was envying Molly.

For Molly, whose life had never been stormy, had reached port. Saw the harbour in which she hoped to spend the rest of her life, waiting for her, and was turning her back on stormy seas of chance. While she——

She realised furiously that her heart was pumping, and her mouth dry. She'd been thinking about Steven Hallett, in her waking moments, pretty continuously since she had left him the evening before, but her mind had not yet travelled on to the thought of meeting him again this morning. And in less than half an hour she would be walking into his office with the mail. What was she going to do?

Idiot! What was there for her to do? Nothing, of course, except to keep herself well in hand and not let him—not let anyone—suspect the sudden revelation that had overtaken her the night before. She tried to be sternly sensible.

He's my employer, and I'm his secretary. I haven't the slightest reason to think, to hope . . .

Her mind flew back, for the first time, to Barry Gage, and their conversation at Alessandro's, and her mouth set in a small, stubborn line.

If Barry Gage wouldn't help, he wouldn't. But as for

taking the least notice of his suggestion that she should mind her own business, and let Steven Hallett fight his own battles. . . . With a sort of unformulated resolve that she was going to work harder than ever, exert more patience, more enthusiasm, that in short by sheer will-power she was going to overcome all the difficulties which beset his path, Karen jumped up, as the train came to a halt at her station, and hurried up to the street.

All the same, her heart gave a frightful leap when Steven Hallett's bell sounded, and her hands trembled as she gathered her papers and notebook together and walked into his room.

She had been half afraid that he might be cross with her - for he *had* been annoyed when she told him that Barry Gage was taking her out to dinner. And then she told herself as she sat down in her usual chair at his side that she had been thinking a great deal too much about something he had probably entirely forgotten.

For he was the usual Mr. Hallett. Already deep in the day's work, firing off numbers at the telephone operator, opening his private mail, flicking over the pages of his diary. She breathed a little sigh that was half relief and half regret, and settled down with notebook and pencil. Ten minutes later she had herself almost forgotten about the previous night, so hard were they both at it.

So that, when the lull came, and he looked up at her, smiling, she was totally unprepared for what he said.

"Well, I hope Mr. Gage fed you decently last night, Miss Winter?"

In spite of herself, Karen flushed.

"He did!" she said. "Very nicely."

"I shall have to remind him," Hallett retorted, half mocking, half serious, "that I have the first claim on your time!"

He was only ragging, of course, she told herself, wishing desperately that she could manage not to feel so absurdly

serious about it. He couldn't really care what she did out of office hours. With a great effort she managed to smile.

"Even after six o'clock?"

Hallett shrugged his shoulders, mock rueful.

"Well, I must be fair, I suppose. After six o'clock, it's really up to you. . . ."

Karen said, breathlessly:

"But - I'd so much rather have come with you——"

That seemed to please him. He smiled, and a beguiling cleft in his chin deepened. He was about to speak again when the telephone bell rang sharply, and he turned to answer it. She became aware of an edge that crept into his voice, and began to listen to his conversation.

"You say those figures are wrong? You're sure? Certainly, I'll look into it and call you back. Yes, within half an hour. 'Bye.'"

Face flushed, expression altered, he turned back to Karen.

"That schedule I sent Jones Brothers - they say there's a mistake in it."

Anxiety sprang to her eyes.

"There can't be, Mr. Hallett! I checked every figure."

"Get the file."

Leaden hearted, light footed, she sped to her room and fetched the file from its place. There it was - the carbon copy of the schedule, and the original draft. Hallett turned first to the latter, and his face clouded more darkly.

"Damnation!" he said, under his breath. Karen's worried eyes were on his face. He looked up and tried to smile, but she could see the resentment in his expression.

"Oh, it's nothing serious, but there is a mistake." And then, noticing her distress, "Not your mistake. Mine. The copy's exact. I slipped up in working the thing out. Damn!"

He leapt to his feet and paced down the room and back, scowling. Then his face began to clear.

"Don't look so worried! I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. But I loathe the thought of having to climb down. It'll get all round this infernal office that I've made a mistake."

Karen looked up at him as he towered over her. Almost without stopping to think she blurted out:

"Listen, Mr. Hallett, can't we pretend it was my mistake?"

And then, scared at her own temerity, she stopped abruptly. He turned to look at her.

"What?"

"Listen." She made a swift movement, as if to tear up the original draft. "It was my mistake! I was tired, and I slipped up when I was copying those figures last night."

The beginnings of a smile twitched at Hallett's attractive mouth.

"Make you the scapegoat, you mean?"

"What does it matter?" Her eyes were wide, imploring. "You know! That's all I care about. Let the rest - Jones and the office - think it was my fault!"

He was looking at her now with a queer expression, and her heart began, for no understandable reason, to bump uncomfortably.

"You'd do that - for me?" he said softly. She nodded, and without knowing it, her whole heart was in her eyes. She stood, trembling a little, as he slipped his arm about her shoulders.

She didn't know how lovely, how desirable, she was, as she stood there, her wide eyes raised to his, her mouth quivering ever so slightly. She didn't know how clearly her adoration was written in every line of her young, yielding body. She only knew that he was looking at her, as she had never dreamed he would look, and that he was holding her in his arms. . . .

He held her so for a long minute. Almost instinctively her head had tilted backward, and his eyes followed the

white line of her throat to its meeting with the dark green of her dress ; for a moment he watched the swift rise and fall of her breast. Then, suddenly, almost involuntarily, his arm tightened about her, drawing her closer, his mouth came down on hers, hard and cool, yet somehow tender and possessive.



moment arrived, however, he told himself that he had been a fool ever to give the matter a thought.

For just as if nothing had happened, Karen knocked on his door and came in with her pile of mail. Just as if nothing had happened, she stood at his elbow, blotting-pad in hand, and deftly whisked each letter away as he signed it. He thought, with a little surge of relief, I knew she'd got plenty of common sense. And if, for a moment, a wild hope and a great softness showed in her eyes as she stood beside him - why, his head was bent over his desk and he saw nothing of it.

When he was half way through signing the letters, a knock came at the door, and Barry Gage swiftly followed it into the room, to give a report on a deal he had just completed. Hallett listened attentively, nodded his head in satisfaction. And then, when Barry had gone again, he turned to Karen with a faintly amused curve of his lips.

"Good thing he didn't come in this morning, eh, Miss Winter?" he said lightly. And laughed a little as the colour flooded her face. She was rather a sweet kid, he thought, studying her closely, and no block of ice under that cool, efficient manner of hers. For two pins he'd kiss her again. . . .

But he thought better of the notion, and let her go. It would be a great deal wiser, he reminded himself, to leave her alone altogether. At any rate, to go slowly . . .

Karen told herself firmly, going home on top of the bus :  
"Of course he didn't mean anything . . ."

And yet, re-living every second of those few, enchanted minutes, remembering the change in his eyes, the impulsive, involuntary tightening of his arms, she couldn't believe it. And then, her mind swinging pendulum-fashion, she thought of the cool impersonality of his manner afterwards, and his casual teasing reference to the incident, and once more she told herself that he didn't mean anything.

She was strung up and tense with nerves by the time she got home, and a little dismayed to find Louise there.

Much as she liked Louise, she hadn't counted on having to entertain a visitor this evening of all evenings. She had planned vaguely to do some sewing, to finish a blouse she was making, and to try to think things out more clearly.

Louise said :

"We both got away to time to-night, and Molly suggested that I might come back with her."

She was quite a different person this evening from the Louise of the beauty parlour, Louise of the crisp white overall. Karen smiled.

"I'm glad she did," she lied valiantly. "Is she getting supper? I'm afraid she does most of the cooking these days - I'm so often late."

Louise raised an eyebrow.

"The new job keeps you busy, then? Is it as thrilling as you thought it was going to be?"

*Thrilling. . . .*

Karen managed to keep her voice level as she replied, quietly enough :

"Yes - it's terribly interesting."

Molly, who came in at that moment with a tray, ready to lay the table, grumbled, mock-serious :

"Interesting - I should think it is! You never know when she's late nowadays if she's working, or having dinner with one of the lads from the office."

Louise laughed.

"How's that, Karen? Lots of nice young men around?"

"Oh, lots!" Karen agreed serenely. "Some of them are very nice. But Molly's over-stated the case. Actually, I was late at the office last night, and one of the salesmen insisted on giving me dinner afterwards. Pure kind-heartedness. He thought I looked tired."

"Ah-ha! Turning gold-digger, are you?"

"I expect," Karen said, "that it'll be a long time before I get a chance to do any more gold-digging. I can't work myself to a pale and wan condition every evening, just to qualify for a free dinner."

And the next time . . . it was hardly likely that Barry Gage would want to take her out again, when they had almost quarrelled over the table at Alessandro's. And she wasn't going to hope, even, that Steven Hallett would ever renew his invitation, even after what had happened this morning. Probably he would not do it, just because of what happened this morning. A shadow touched her eyes, but mercifully neither Louise nor Molly noticed it.

"Don't you wish," Louise was teasing, "that we had a few nice-looking men around our place, Molly?"

Molly smiled.

"I can't say that it matters much to me," she observed quietly, and Louise made a face.

"Of course not! I forgot all about that Jim of yours. But a lorn, lone woman like me, who hasn't a Jim."

Food was on the table now. Molly shut the door, and the three of them sat down. She said:

"Don't you believe all this lorn, lone woman stuff, Kay. Louise is a dark horse. I could mention at least one man who's always trying to get her to go out with him."

"Poof!" said Louise. "Don't be stingy, Molly! Make it two!"

Molly frowned.

"I wasn't thinking of old Simonides . . ."

Louise said, with a sort of brittle irony:

"Oh, no! You meant Philip. Well, one matters just as much as the other to me."

Molly uttered a shocked protest, and Louise laughed, quite cheerfully.

"Philip would be so charming—if only he had the old man's money. And Simonides would be charming—if he weren't such a frightful piece of work." She turned to Karen, still smiling.

"Philip," she explained, "is an old friend of mine, who's foolish enough to think he's in love with me. Rather a lamb, really, but he hasn't a bean, and I don't think he'll ever make money. And Simmy—" She shrugged her

shoulders again, and her lips curved. "Molly had better tell you about him! She'll make it so much more graphic than I will."

"He's the most frightful old man——" Molly took up the invitation. "Greek, or something. He looks a hundred at least – and *crawly*!" She shuddered. "He's got a large, fat wife who comes to us for double chin treatments – he came along one day and saw Louise. And he's got the cheek to try and get off with her. The old horror!"

"He's simply rolling in money," Louise contributed wistfully.

"I thought," Molly said, rising to cut more bread, "that you were one of those independent women, Lou. Like Karen. That you weren't interested in men."

Louise made a face.

"It isn't the men I want – it's their money!" she said. "It's tough, being a woman, and trying to get anywhere on your own. I don't want to go on working for three pounds a week and tips all my life. I want comfort, one day, and a spot of luxury. I'd rather go on slogging away for ever than marry a poor man. That's all."

Molly laughed.

"Money isn't everything!"

Karen and Louise chorused an "Oh!" Molly persisted.

"It isn't! I hope Jim's going to do well eventually, but if he doesn't – well, it won't matter. I don't like work any better than Louise, and a whole lot less than Karen, but I'd rather cook and wash and darn for Jim in a home of my own than go on working, even if I were going to make a thousand a year."

Louise cocked a whimsical eyebrow at Karen.

"What do you say to that?" she asked.

"Molly's right – for Molly," Karen agreed. "If we don't feel as she does, it's because we're made differently. And we think she's crazy, and she thinks we're crazy. That's all."

"The trouble is," Molly said tolerantly, gathering plates

together, "that neither of you are in love. You'd feel differently about things if you were."

"Oh, love!" scoffed Louise. But Karen was silent for a moment. Would she feel like that about Steven Hallett? Would she want to cook and wash and darn for him, if . . .

She thought: Perhaps I would . . . but what I want is to work with him as well as for him. I wouldn't want to stay at home while he went off to the office . . . I'd want to be a whole-time partner, and not just a domestic one. She smiled at Louise, and said nothing.

The subject was dropped then, while they all cleared away. Since Molly had acted as cook, Karen insisted on washing up, and Louise went into the kitchenette to help her. And when everything was clean, and away in its place, they joined Molly in front of the sitting-room fire, and the talk drifted into other channels.

Molly and Louise discussed the day's work, and the various clients. Louise said to Karen:

"Remember that woman who came into the next cubicle when I was doing your nails? She's always with us these days. She's got to compete with film stars, now, and it keeps her busy!" She gave a little snort of amusement. "She should worry! When you've got as much money as she has, you don't need looks to attract young men."

Karen remembered.

"Oh, yes - Mrs. Sandle."

Louise nodded.

"Ian Foster's her latest."

Karen's eyes widened. Ian Foster . . . he'd been with Steven Hallett at Olympia, and Steven had said he was one of his oldest friends. That she'd probably see a lot of him. And Ian Foster was the young man this Mrs. Sandle had in tow.

For a moment she frowned thoughtfully. Then her face cleared. After all, it was none of her business. And Ian Foster was probably perfectly capable of taking care of himself. She leant back in her chair and lit a cigarette,



while Louise skipped on to tell stories of a certain famous actress who wanted to have her face lifted.

Later that night, when she had gone, Molly said tentatively :

" You like Louise, don't you ? " Karen nodded.

" Yes. Why ? "

" Nothing much. Only——" Molly hesitated. " I wondered if you might like to see if she'd share the flat when I go ? You could keep it on then, instead of moving. And I think you'd get on all right. She's quite a good sort, and she's very square about money and that sort of thing."

Karen considered.

" It might be an idea."

" There's no need to do anything in a hurry," Molly said comfortably. " But I think she'd probably jump at the chance. Suppose you wait a bit, and see more of her ? And then I could sound her out."

Karen threw an affectionate arm round the other girl's shoulders.

" You're a dear," she said, " to be thinking of me like that. It might be a very good idea. But you know, Molly — sharing with someone else could never be the same thing as sharing with you."

Molly flushed a little with pleasure.

" We've got on together, haven't we ? " she said, " although we do look at things so differently. It's a pity I had to go and fall in love with Jim, isn't it ? "

" A frightful pity ! " Karen agreed, half serious and half laughing.

Molly had sobered again, struck by a sudden thought.

" There's only one thing about Louise . . ." she said slowly. " She doesn't know it — or she won't admit it — but she's in love with Philip. Only she's so silly about this money business. If Philip had a stroke of luck, she'd marry him to-morrow."

" And I'd be left on my own again ! " Karen jeered.  
" Well, we needn't cross bridges, anyhow. Maybe she

won't like the idea of sharing in the first place. Maybe - who knows - I might go mad and get married myself ! ”

She hadn't meant Molly to take the words seriously, but Molly did. Caught at the straw, and said :

“ Oh, if you only would ! ”

And then, as Karen managed to laugh, she added mournfully :

“ But I don't suppose you ever will - you're so darned independent ! I can imagine men falling for you, all right, but I can't see you falling for any man.”

Karen's lashes swept quickly down, and her colour heightened. . . . But Molly was already on her way out of the room. She was so sure that Karen would never give marriage the serious consideration that it deserved - only, of course, if you found a man like Jim.

## CHAPTER VII

MOLLY would have been not only startled but dismayed to know that Karen fell asleep that night thinking of Steven Hallett ; but Karen did. And woke in the morning to feel that there was something exciting in the day . . . just because she was going to see him again. Unaffected by the fact that she had seen him every day for the last fortnight, and would probably continue to see him daily. Indeed, that, in the present stage of her feeling for him, only added to the excitement.

She was ten minutes early in getting to the office, and met him going in at the door. He laid a hasty hand on her arm — and the blood in her veins ran riotously at his mere touch.

"This is grand!" he said. "Trust you to be early when I wanted you here! I've just remembered that I have an appointment I can't cancel this morning, and last night I promised Foster to take the order-form for his new car out to Elstree to-day, before lunch, for his signature. I'm going to send you instead."

Karen gasped. Send her? Why not one of the salesmen? Hallett laughed at the surprise in her eyes.

"You see, it's a very special job," he said, standing aside for her to enter the lift. "I can send you as my deputy, but if I sent one of the men, he might think I was passing it over. So don't take your hat off — we can run quickly through the mail, and I'll get one of the other girls to take any urgent letters later. I'll go through the whole thing with you, and send you off in a car."

Fortunately there wasn't much in the mail. Nothing

that couldn't wait till the afternoon - to Karen's secret relief, for she was absurdly jealous even to think of someone else doing Hallett's work. He pushed it all on one side, and took some scribbled notes out of his pocket.

"We settled pretty well everything last night," he said, "though there may be some details to add later. You'd better type out the order-form to this specification. And, Miss Winter . . ."

There was a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Foster will sign the form, but the chances are that the deposit cheque may be signed by someone else - though the receipt will be made out in his name. As a matter of fact - very confidentially - a friend of Foster is giving him this car as a birthday present."

Karen's eyes dropped to the notes in her book. Special chassis, special body, a host of luxurious extras . . . a total figure of nearly three thousand pounds. And a birthday present. . . .

"Very nice for Mr. Foster!" she said quietly. Hallett laughed outright.

"Very nice!" he agreed. "And not a bad order for me! Anyhow, that's the lot. If you'll knock it off - and get together those samples of paint and upholstery——"

He lifted the receiver of the house phone, and as Karen went out of the room, she heard him issuing crisp instructions for the car and driver to be ready for Miss Winter in ten minutes' time. A quarter of an hour later, he took her down to the door, with the papers neatly folded in a long envelope.

"The car he's ordering is substantially like this one," he told her. "If he wants to check-up on anything, get him to have a look at it, and Hobson here will give him any technical information he requires."

The uniformed driver touched his cap smartly, and held the door open for Karen. She smiled up at his stolid face.

"I think I'd rather sit in front with you, if I may."

She'd have felt a fool, lolling in the back of the great car,

as if it belonged to her. It was much pleasanter to sit beside the driver, and watch his hands on wheel and gear lever. (One of these days, she thought, I'm going to learn to drive. . . .) She asked him questions, which he answered good-naturedly enough, smiling a little at her ignorance. And then, as she showed an intelligent grasp of his explanations, he expanded a little, and lectured her earnestly. Karen thrilled. *He*, at least, didn't seem to think it extraordinary that she wanted to learn something!

She managed to pick up quite a lot in the short half-hour or so that it took them to reach Elstree, where a fresh little thrill took hold of her. She was, she realised excitedly, going into a film studio, and that was a new experience in itself.

A stout gate at the entrance to the grounds barred their progress. Hobson hooted, and a uniformed man appeared from the lodge. Referred to a sheet of instructions, and then swung the gate open to allow their passage, only to close it promptly and firmly behind them.

Hallett had told her: "I'll ring him up and let him know you're coming instead of me - and he'll make it all right with the gate. They're very fussy about admitting people to the studio."

A short drive took them to the main entrance. Karen looked round curiously.

It might have been almost any sort of factory dropped down alone in the middle of a sort of park, a mile or two beyond the village which had been England's first Hollywood. Only, as the car drew slowly up at the steps, a couple of girls came running down them, quaintly incongruous in mediæval costume, and followed by a young man in a shabby sweater and shabbier flannel bags. Their vivid make-up had a sort of unreality in the daylight.

Another barrier awaited her in the hall, and another uniformed man stepped out to greet her. Less suspicious than the man at the gate, since she had got so far.

"Mr. Foster? I think he's on the set." He retreated



into his cubby-hole to study a blackboard which Karen could see through the glass window. "Studio 7. I'll get someone to take you there. Hey, Jimmy!"

A small boy appeared from nowhere. A pert, wide-awake-looking urchin.

"Lady to see Mr. Foster - by appointment. Take her along to Studio 7."

And now she was through the barrier, and excitement began to grow. Passages branched off right and left from the central hall, and there was a slamming of doors, an occasional burst of laughter. A neat maid sped across their path, and a vast untidy woman followed her. A tall, thin, distinguished-looking youth strolled by in a lounge suit, only his make-up betraying the fact that he was that thrilling thing an actor . . . catching the interested glance in Karen's wide eyes, he preened himself slightly. Extra players don't get many interested glances to nourish their hopes and their vanity.

And now they seemed to have drawn away from the main offices. The corridor they were traversing seemed to be as high as a cathedral, and dotted with mysterious doors. Through one of them, half open, she caught a glimpse of scenery, and a tangled mass of cables. Almost involuntarily she paused, and her guide grinned. She'd never been in a studio before. Obviously.

"Six" proclaimed one of the fast-shut doors, and then "Seven." There was a red light glowing outside it, and the urchin paused, his hand on the knob.

"Can't go in yet," he announced importantly. "They're shooting." Karen waited docilely. An enormous trolley made its appearance, loaded with urns and cups and plates, with buns and apples, trundled along by a couple of women in overalls. They, too, paused at the red light, and began to gossip quietly, as they waited. And then, at last, the red light winked out. The boy pushed the door open, and Karen followed him inside.

A vast, a colossal barn, with scaffolding all over the place,

and the raw, unfinished look of a workshop. A tangle of cables, over which she stepped gingerly. Men in sweaters, men in shirt-sleeves, bustling about with the restless energy of an ant-hill. A din of carpentering noises, bewildering after the quiet of the corridor. A vast, infernal-looking machine on runners, which she realised was a camera. Lights everywhere – on stands, on scaffolding, on a gallery running round the barn, where men bustled or lounged. Karen's guide, unimpressed by what was everyday business to him, led her straight to the far end, where there was a small oasis.

The shell of a room – a beautiful, fastidious room, exquisitely furnished. A fragile bed, a gleaming dressing-table, shaded lamps. Three people, grouped in the midst of it all, arguing furiously.

A stout, bald, red-faced man in an overall. A lovely girl, whose face seemed oddly familiar in spite of its heavy make-up, sheathed in a fragile, exquisite *négligé*, and, lounge-suited, a cigarette between his lips, the man she had come to see.

The boy hovered around, for all his pertness unwilling to break in on the discussion. Ian Foster, however, glanced up and spotted Karen, and broke off in the middle of a sentence, with a wave of his hand.

"Anyway – we can settle that when we do the re-take!" he remarked airily. "I'm sorry, Braun, old boy, but unless you want me very urgently, this lady has come to see me on business."

Karen felt her colour rising as the girl in the *négligé* and the director both turned to stare at her. The latter started to argue, but the girl backed up Foster.

"I can do with a break – my make-up's getting to need it. Don't be such a slave-driver, Braun. You know you want to check-up on the lighting. Use your stand-ins! Ten minutes, darling! You won't need us, and you know it!"

The fat man shrugged his shoulders. She was right, but

he didn't relish having his authority flouted. He shot a malignant glance at Foster's elegant back as he moved over to Karen.

"It is Miss Winter, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"From Mr. Hallett."

"Let's get out of this racket. Come along to my dressing-room."

He slid a hand under her arm and steered her back the way she had come. As they left the studio she glanced again at the trolley, now surrounded by a small, clamorous crowd, to whom the overalled women were serving coffee and milk and soft drinks as fast as they could.

"You've got the order-form with you? Good. We'll run through it, and then, I'm afraid, I may have to keep you hanging about for a time. I want—a friend—to see it; and she isn't here yet."

She? Karen's mind flicked about alertly, remembering this thing and that, and piecing them together. Louise—what was it Louise had said last night? That Ian Foster was Mrs. Sandle's "latest." And Hallett had said that someone was giving Foster the car as a birthday present. That all added up easily enough. She felt an instant's revulsion against this tall, blond, handsome boy, who could accept a gift of that sort—from a woman of that sort. And then she reminded herself that it was none of her business. . . . Her business was to get the order-form signed for Hallett, and the deposit cheque, no matter who signed it.

The dressing-room was small and stuffy, but there were two large armchairs and a divan in it. Foster tossed some clothes off one of the chairs and invited her to sit down. Then he held out his hand for the order-form. Karen gave it to him silently, and watched his face as he ran rapidly and shrewdly through the details. At the end, he tossed it back into her lap.

"Seems O.K. Lucilla will want to see it, though."

"I came up in a car of much the same type," Karen

told him, in a small, business-like voice. "Mr. Hallett said - if there were anything you wanted to check - and the driver can answer any technical points——"

Foster laughed.

"Bless you, my dear, I leave all that to old Steven." He paused, still smiling. "How d'you like working for him? And have you been doing any more shooting?"

Karen flushed, and laughed.

"Very much!" she said primly to his first question, and "No!" to the second. He was on the point of saying something else, when a knock came at the door, and a man came in, with a tray.

"Mr. Braun says he'll be ready in five minutes, sir. . . ."

"Oh, damn Braun!"

There were two cups of coffee on the tray. Foster gave one to Karen and began to shovel sugar into the second. Turned grumbling to his dressing-table, scrutinised his face keenly under the battery of light bulbs that encircled it, and then, picking up a huge powder-puff, began carefully to restore his make-up. Karen sipped her coffee thoughtfully, aware of a strange, other-world sensation. The man returned, with a more urgent message. Foster shrugged his shoulders, and turned to Karen.

"Finished? I'm afraid I shall have to go back, and of course Lucilla isn't here yet. Like to come and watch them shooting?"

She rose eagerly.

"I'd love to!"

"Come along, then."

They found her a place, in a canvas chair with a famous name stencilled on its back, and then they forgot her. She sat, mouse-still, fascinated by the strange, crazy, intensely serious business of making a film. Lights blazed, and the hammering and shouting went on. The exquisite blonde in the *négligé* reappeared, and a young man in a beret dived under a black cloth. Braun bellowed and cursed, and the place seemed like a madhouse. The only touch of familiarity

was embodied in a girl – quite an ordinary-looking girl, who sat in a canvas chair like Karen's, with a fat file of manuscript on her knee, a pencil in hand, and a stop-watch beside her. She looked across at Karen and smiled slightly, and then her eyes travelled alertly back to the set. Once she jumped to her feet and went across to take the cigarette from Ian Foster's hand, to substitute a new one.

"You'd just lit it!" she reminded him quietly.

A blaze of colour and light and noise. . . . Karen found her thoughts travelling back to Olympia. . . . She saw again the shooting-booth, and Hallett and Foster, and the sloe-eyed girl attendant.

They were rehearsing now, a couple of phrases. Until Braun was satisfied at last; then he bellowed an order, and a miraculous hush fell. Someone hurried to shut the door, and a youth with a clapper took up his position in front of the mike.

"Errant Lady. Scene 90, take 3," he proclaimed, while someone held a board with the same legend in front of the camera. And an infinitesimal scrap of drama recorded itself on film and sound track.

A few minutes and it was all over. Lights were switched off, and the noise and banging began again. And the process went on repeating itself under Karen's fascinated eyes.

She was stiff and her head ached a little – she had been afraid to move, even during the intervals of noise – when, with a reluctant glance at his watch at the end of a take, Braun proclaimed the lunch interval, and a swift exodus began. Like children set free by the ringing of the school bell, extras and prop men dispersed. Ian Foster came strolling over to Karen, with an air of weariness.

"Frightful business, isn't it!" he commented. "I expect you're dying of hunger. Let's go and see if that devil Lucilla has turned up yet."

And so back again to his dressing-room.

And there, as he pushed the door open, his manner



changed. Became no longer natural Ian Foster, but something as artificial as the character he had just been creating in front of the camera. Karen caught a glimpse of opulent sables, a hint of extravagant perfume, as he moved swiftly forward.

"Darling! So you've got here at last!"

Lucilla Sandle had come.

## CHAPTER VIII

KAREN THOUGHT, shocked into surprise: But she *is* beautiful!"

Somehow Louise's scathing comments had conjured up the vision of a woman definitely *passée*, a woman clinging absurdly to youth and fascinations no longer hers.

It was not till later that Karen began to realise that Louise had been telling the truth. To see the small, sharp lines etched on Lucilla Sandle's face by the years, and only partly obliterated by the skill of the beauty expert. To notice the hardness about the mouth, which lipstick skilfully disguised. To see the ruthless greed in the dark eyes, which could look tender and enchanting when Lucilla willed that they should. At this moment, even against Ian Foster's youth, she looked genuinely lovely, incredibly glamorous. And the voice which had struck sharply, imperiously, through the curtains of the beauty parlour's cubicle, was softened and coloured by clever inflexions.

"I have arrived," she agreed. "My dear Ian, you didn't really think I was going to get up at an ungodly hour to come and watch you making pictures? I timed it very nicely, I think! We can have lunch now, all by ourselves, in peace and quiet. . . ."

Her glance fell on Karen, and for an instant its softness vanished. A dangerous spark lit in its dark depths. "Who . . . ?"

"Oh, darling, it's about the car. Hallett couldn't come, so he sent his secretary. . . ."

Lucilla Sandle's eyebrows rose. She wasn't used to being fobbed off with secretaries, it said. Foster rushed on.

"It's all right, really! I talked the whole thing over with Hallett last night, and we settled everything - this is only a matter of form——"

"You did, did you?" Lucilla said lazily. "Well, I hope I approve of everything you settled. . . ."

Her glance was languorous, amorous, her voice light. Only a woman could have detected the little, metallic ring in the tone. Karen shivered slightly. Stood uncomfortably in the background. Foster looked round for the order-form. Mrs. Sandle said suavely:

"Well, suppose we talk it over over lunch? You're going to give me some, I suppose?"

"Of course! Would you like to go to the restaurant?"

She shook her head decidedly.

"No. Too noisy. Too much grease-paint. Get them to send in a tray. I don't suppose they've got anything decent, anyway."

"It isn't the Ritz, certainly!" Foster told her cheerfully, "but you shall have your tray, you spoilt brat! You've had trays before, without grumbling at them. . . ."

His voice conjured up visions of other lunches, shared in the privacy of that dressing-room. A little smile curled the corners of Lucilla Sandle's mouth. She said, more graciously:

"All right, darling. Miss - Miss - I suppose she can get something?"

We don't want her here! said the undertones. Foster looked confused for a moment. Then he turned to Karen, and, amazingly, winked.

"Surely!" he said soothingly. "She can get some food in the restaurant. I'll just show her the way, and order that tray. What would you like?"

They settled the details, and then he shepherded Karen out of the room - she was glad enough to make her escape.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said hastily, "but she's a damn difficult woman - you can see that! I'll see you're all right, though. . . ."

His eye lit up as he saw a girl coming along, and he let out a hail.

"Miss French - you going to lunch? I wonder if you'd mind taking Miss Winter here along, and seeing that she has some, too? Both of you on me, of course."

It was the quiet girl of the deck-chair and the fat file of manuscript. Her eyes glinted a little with amusement, but she nodded amiably enough. Foster said, comfortably:

"That's a good girl, darling. Shoot her back to my room afterwards. And you might be an angel and tell them to send someone along to take an order for a tray. . . . See you later, Miss Winter!"

He disappeared back into the hot little dressing-room. Karen smiled, slightly embarrassed.

"I'm awfully sorry - being foisted on you like this."

Miss French laughed.

"Don't you worry. I'm maid of all work round here. Besides, I'll be glad to have you, and we'll have the most expensive lunch the restaurant can produce, at Ian's expense. He won't mind, and he deserves to pay something for his wangling. I suppose the girl-friend's there?"

"Yes - if you mean Mrs. Sandle."

"I'll say I do. No wonder little Ian's so busy!" She laughed again, quietly, and led the way, again through those apparently endless corridors, to the studio restaurant.

There was fresh interest for Karen here. The huge room was simple enough - no Ritz, as Ian Foster had remarked to Lucilla Sandle - with long trestles, scurrying waitresses, the clashing of crockery, and throughout a buzz of talk and laughter. Now and then a voice would rise above the others. Now and then some light-hearted soul would flip lumps of sugar at a friend sitting the other side of the room.

The menu was plain enough - roast beef, sausage and mashed, fried fish - the food good, and the quantities ample. It might have been the canteen in any big business house

as far as menu and service went. Only the patrons were different.

At the table beside Karen and Miss French, an extra in very stiff doublet and long hose ate and drank carefully, to spare his make-up, a napkin tucked under his chin. Two demure nuns – demure, but for the bold colouring of cheeks and mouth, and the accentuation of their eyes – gossiped volubly with a “typical French maid” in skimpy black frock and frilled apron. A tousle-headed youth, in a baggy “Fair Isle” pullover, argued passionately with a colleague, tastefully attired in a pseudo-leather golf jerkin and plus fours. An ever-changing little knot of people halted beside a couple of pin tables.

Karen studied it all curiously, and Miss French watched her.

“Like a bear-garden, isn’t it?” she commented serenely. “We’ve got six productions all on the floor at once – you know, we’re making six films at once – and three have huge casts.”

The languorous blonde of Ian Foster’s picture drifted in, with the short stout director in tow.

“Stella Fitch,” Miss French said. Karen looked at the girl with new interest.

“I thought I knew her face.”

“She’s a frightful little cat, and she can’t act much, but she photographs like nobody’s business. That’s Steve Howe over there – he’s over from America to make the picture. And Malcolm Press. And Lina Greig.”

Fascinated, Karen looked from one to the other. There is something rather thrilling, to the outsider, in encountering famous names in the flesh for the first time. She smiled at Miss French, who was watching her keenly.

“Go on!” she mocked lightly. “Why don’t you say the usual thing. ‘Oh, how wonderful!’ or ‘It must be marvellous to make all that money!’”

Karen laughed.

“I’m sorry.”



"I know," the other girl agreed comfortably. "They're not exciting when you see them all here, gobbling away at sausages and mashed."

"I don't know," Karen demurred. "It's a natural sort of thing——"

"It's economical," Miss French told her drily. "Of course, some of the big ones lunch in their dressing-rooms, like young Ian — though he'd be here if he were alone."

"You sound," Karen said curiously, "as if you rather disliked it all."

"I don't!" the denial came quickly. "I love it! It's the most exacting job I know, but frightfully interesting. Braun's an old devil to work for, but he's as clever as the devil, too, and I'm learning a lot."

She smiled at the curious look on Karen's face.

"I want to write for the films one day." Then she paused. "We're talking a lot about films and me."

"I'm sorry — was I inquisitive? But I've never been in a studio before, and it is fascinating. I'm only here because my boss is engaged this morning, and sent me to see Mr. Foster about a car instead."

"The one Lucilla's giving him?" she grinned at Karen's look of surprise. "Bless you, everyone here knows all about it! He's an artful little hound. And if half the stories they tell about the lady are true, it looks like a case of diamond cut diamond."

A sudden distaste must have shown in Karen's eyes. The other girl leant forward swiftly.

"Forget it, my dear! The film racket is a hotbed of gossip, and half of it isn't true, anyway. And young Foster isn't a bad kid at all."

. . . . .

Oddly enough, the words were still ringing in Karen's ears as she returned to the dressing-room, and knocked timidly on the door. Miss French, with a cheerful wave of the hand, had disappeared into the back regions: "Got to

type my notes on this morning's work, if I can, before we start off again! Tell Ian I charged the lunch up to him!"

There was a moment's silence after her knock, and then the door opened.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Winter." Ian Foster threw it wide, and motioned her to enter. "I was just filling up that comic form of yours. And I've got the cheque for you. So everything's in order, isn't it?"

For the life of her, Karen couldn't help glancing swiftly at the cheque, before she folded it away with the order-form, and sure enough, Lucilla Sandle's dashing signature ran across the foot, though the form was signed by Foster. Remembering that she was a business woman, she smiled politely, and murmured her thanks. Lucilla Sandle was leaning back in one of the armchairs, and obviously a great deal more amiable, now that she had had her lunch. She even managed to smile at Karen.

"Listen, 'Cilla," Foster suggested. "Miss Winter came up in a car very like the one I've just ordered. Come and have a look at it, and see if you like the body. Braun won't want me on the set for a while yet."

Rather lazily, Lucilla Sandle demurred at first. Then she gave way, held out a hand for Foster to pull her up from the chair, and slipping her arm through his drifted through the door with him, a slim, elegant figure in smart black, with sables hanging negligently from her shoulder. Karen followed them out to the car park.

Hobson, gossiping comfortably with a small knot of chauffeurs, sprang to attention as he saw them approach. Foster, who evidently knew him, nodded amiably, and, throwing open the door of the great car, began to explain various points to Mrs. Sandle, who nodded approval.

"Really," she said, "I don't know why I'm giving you a car, when I need a new one for town myself."

Foster was looking at Karen, and she saw his eyelid droop in a swift wink.

"Why don't you get one, then?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know. It's so much bother. So much business; and I'm too lazy to understand business properly."

Foster's head was turned away from her, and Karen caught the swift, cynical grin that flickered over his face.

"Let old Hallett take care of it all for you — eh, Miss Winter?"

"I'm sure," Karen said courteously, "that he would save you all possible trouble, Mrs. Sandle."

"That's what they always say. And then it's nothing but bothering with specifications — and upholstery——"

Karen thought swiftly, desperately recalling to mind a list she had typed the day before.

"I wonder——" she said diffidently. "We've just taken delivery of two new Rolls-Royces with special bodies — one of them something like this, but——" she caught the flash in Lucilla Sandle's eyes, and anticipated her scornful protest, "quite exclusive, of course. Built to our special instructions. Mr. Hallett chose the paintwork and upholstery and everything himself, and they're very smart indeed. The one I was thinking of is painted grey and black. . . ."

She paused, holding her breath. Had she done the wrong thing? Foster backed her up.

"It'll be a smart job if Hallett ordered it. What's the price, Miss Winter?"

"Just a little more than the car you've ordered, Mr. Foster — close on three thousand pounds——"

"Would you care to see it, Lucilla?"

Lucilla hesitated.

"Oh — I don't know——" Her eyes flickered alluringly at him. "You wouldn't like to give it to *me* for a birthday present, would you?"

He laughed aloud.

"Don't I wish I could, darling! But I could save you

some trouble ; I do know that Hallett would really look after you. He's a very clever young man——"

A hint of interest showed in her dark eyes.

" Well, perhaps. . . ."

" He would bring it along himself for you to see," Karen promised.

The lovely Mrs. Sandle, sure of the power her money gave her, swithered. Looked at Foster. Looked at the car. Glanced at Karen, and then came to a sudden decision.

" Oh, all right, then, since you want me to have it." She turned to Karen, crisp authority in her voice. " Tell him to bring it round to my house at half past eleven to-morrow morning. But, mind you," she added to Foster, " I won't have it if I don't like it, even though he is your friend ! "

" Don't be absurd ! " he laughed. " As if I should ever want you to have anything that you didn't like ! "

A young man in a beret had appeared in the car park, and was obviously making for them. Foster scowled.

" Braun's on the warpath, Lucilla. There's one of his minions coming to tell me so. I shall have to go."

" I'll come back with you," she said promptly. Smiled at Karen with the mechanical sweetness she reserved for shopgirls, when there was someone there to see and appreciate it, slipped her hand through his arm again, and drifted away. Karen got into the car for her return journey, her heart pumping with excitement. . . .

He'd be pleased – surely he'd be pleased – if he managed to sell one of those Rolls-Royces to Mrs. Sandle. Even to a firm like Bamfields, a three thousand pound order wasn't to be sneezed at.

## CHAPTER IX

STEVEN HALLETT was alone in his office when Karen returned. She had gone into her own room first, to slip off hat and coat, and she made her entrance with her notebook, as well as the signed order-form in hand. He looked up as she walked in.

"All O.K.? Good girl."

He studied the order-form and the cheque, grinning slightly as he saw the signature. Then he turned to Karen.

"Have an exciting time?"

"Oh, very——" she hesitated, her heart pumping. "Mr. Hallett — you know that new grey Rolls that came in yesterday?"

He nodded.

"Well — I hope I've done the right thing, but I've said you'll take it round to show Mrs. Sandle at eleven-thirty to-morrow; if she likes it she'll probably buy it——"

He stared at her for a moment in silence, and then jumped to his feet.

"What?"

"Well — she was saying she wanted another car — and it was such a nuisance, buying them and having to go through specifications and things . . . so I thought of that Rolls — I should think she'd like it——"

Steven Hallett let out a whoop of joy. He'd been secretly worried about that car. It was very ultra-smart. Not every man's Rolls, as far as there was such a thing, and Hallett, who had ordered the special body, the rather delicate paint, the luxurious upholstery, had begun to



wonder when he saw the completed car arrive in the showroom if he had been a fool, and landed the firm with something they could only dispose of at a loss – and a corresponding reduction of his own credit with old Bamfield. But he realised instantly that it was just the sort of thing to appeal to a woman of Mrs. Sandle's calibre, and was confident that now the appointment had been fixed up to show it to her, he could persuade her to sign on the dotted line. He said, almost reverently :

"Aren't you the grand girl ! "

The colour flamed to Karen's cheeks at that, and her eyes were like stars. He *was* glad . . . she drew a little breath of delight, and he stood for a moment studying her obvious happiness, a little smile curving his mouth.

Then, with a swift glance at the door, he reached out and caught at both her hands. Drew her, unresisting, towards him, and put his arms round her.

"It's your own fault," he murmured into her ear. "If you do things like that – and look like that – you must expect this sort of thing to happen ! "

She thought, as he kissed her, he meant to do it this time. . . .

He gave her a little hug, and then let her go. Stood back, and watched her with laughing eyes.

"This," he said, "is becoming a habit ! Do you think it's a good one ? "

But Karen was silent, lost in a rosy mist. She looked up at him, and he took half a step towards her again. Then halted, turned and went back to his desk. Karen pulled herself together, and went to sit down in her chair at his elbow.

"Pity there's work to be done, isn't it ? " he murmured, with a swift side-glance.

She could smile, now that she had regained control of her tremulous lips. Seeing that she had already managed to look as if nothing had happened, he rang for the cashier and handed over Lucilla Sandle's cheque, with instructions that

it was to be credited to Ian Foster's account. Spoke to the showroom on the house telephone, and arranged for the grey Rolls to be ready for demonstration the following morning. Polished off an incoming telephone call, and then turned back to Karen with a brisk air of decision.

"And now, Miss Winter, I've got another job I want you to do. Quite a different one, but even more important." He picked a cable form out of the pile of papers before him.

"I've just heard from Old Man Bamfield that he's sailing next week. That means he'll be back in a fortnight or so. And I'd give a whole lot to get things really straightened out here before he arrives."

"You mean?" Karen asked in a low voice.

"All this nonsense among the staff. If the Old Man finds out how much insubordination has been going on, he'll do some wholesale sacking once he gets back, and I don't want that to happen. The staff here has given me a lot of trouble but I don't want to see any of them out of their jobs because they have been a bit foolish. I'm going to do the best I can - and any propaganda work you can put in will be all to the good."

Karen thought . . . how decent he is. If I were in his shoes, I'd have half of them sacked. Her glowing admiration showed in her eyes as she looked at him.

She said, putting her thoughts into words:

"If they'd behaved to me as they have to you - I wouldn't be worrying whether they lost their jobs or not. I think you're too good to them, Mr. Hallett!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"One's got to be human." He hesitated. "What do you think of Gage?"

Her eyes were wide and sincere.

"He's been perfectly all right."

"He hasn't - encouraged them?"

Karen shook her head vigorously.

"Indeed he hasn't! Quite the reverse."

For some reason, he seemed to be faintly disappointed. He raised no question, however.

"If you think that, then . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure of it. He's done all he can to make them be sensible. I've heard him tick some of the others off."

"I'm not going to ask who," Steven Hallett said levelly, "but I can guess. Well, it's to be hoped for their own sakes that they listen to him. Anyhow, you might see if you can do anything with the girls. Men are bad enough, but I hate seeing women thrown out of their jobs."

"I will, since you want me to," she promised. He nodded his head.

"Good girl. It was a lucky break for me when I took you on, wasn't it? I'll have you running the whole thing for me soon - taking orders, getting customers. . . ."

She said, honestly :

"Mr. Foster helped me, you know."

"I should think so!" Hallett laughed, a little cynically. "He's getting a nice commission on the sale of the car he's buying - very privately, and just between the two of us. I expect he'll try and get something out of the Rolls if the Sandle woman buys, but he won't get much. If anyone deserves that commission, you do. After all, I didn't take you on to sell cars for me."

Karen flushed.

"I'm here to do anything you want——"

"Anything?" Hallett asked, turning and looking right into her eyes. And then laughed as her lashes dropped, and the ready colour crept again to her cheeks.

. . . . .

For the next few days her mind was full of the thing that Steven Hallett had asked her to do for him. Not even his jubilant return from the demonstration to Mrs. Sandle, with another signed order and another deposit cheque, drove it out of her mind. She summoned all her tact, all her subtlety, when she was talking to other members of the

staff, and felt, a little comfortingly, that she had done some good. Their attitude of open hostility was toning down. They knew that old Bamfield was shortly due back from the States, and one or two had begun to wonder uneasily what he would say. After all, Hallett was the Sales Manager.

The only direction in which she seemed to score neither success nor failure was with Barry Gage. He seemed firmly impervious to her hints, her leading remarks.

Apart from that one subject, he was invariably – and she thought genuinely – friendly. Took her out to lunch once or twice, helped her generously with her work. The sense of strain that had existed between them for a day or two after the dinner at Alessandro's had gone, and she was glad of it. He was, she thought, one of those people who didn't excite you very much, but whom you couldn't help liking. The sort of person to whom you chattered about your own affairs, without stopping to wonder whether he was interested or bored, because he always seemed to be interested.

And so, by degrees, she had told him all about Molly and Jim – never guessing how much she told him about herself in the process. About the flat she shared with Molly. About Molly's cooking.

"Sounds good!" he told her cheerfully. "You'd better ask me to dinner one evening, and let me sample it. I'll wash up the dishes!"

She had looked up, half startled.

"You wouldn't – I mean, we'd love to have you, but it wouldn't really amuse you to come?"

"Of course it would! Will you have me one evening?"

"Of course we will!" She thought: That's the difference between him and Steven. . . . I'd hate to ask Steven, he'd find it so dull (but her heart quickened just at the thought of having him). But Mr. Gage won't mind, and I won't mind him. He's Jim's sort.

He'd come along, she realised, and eat Molly's steak and onions, and drink beer, and lean back in his chair after

dinner smoking, or help to wash dishes, just as Jim did. So she said, impulsively :

"What about to-morrow? Jim will be there, so you won't have two women on your hands - and I think you'll like him."

"I shall be delighted!" He accepted rather formally, and then grinned. "Chivvied you into that, didn't I? Firmly invited myself to a free meal."

"You've given me lots of free meals," Karen pointed out, laughing. "And I like to return hospitality - when I can!"

She smiled inwardly, thinking of Molly's comments if she could have heard that last speech. "Why have you always got to be so independent, Kay?" She didn't know. She just happened to be made that way. Barry Gage was eyeing her curiously, and his remark so neatly echoed Molly's imaginary comment that Karen laughed aloud.

"Independent little piece, aren't you? Don't you know it's horribly unfeminine?"

Karen flushed.

"I don't know why it's considered unfeminine to like keeping your end up! All women aren't out to get all they can - or to drape themselves round some man's neck. . . ."

"No?" he said, and there was a curious inflexion in his voice. "There are times when I'm inclined to wish that they were!"

Just for the moment, his expression was a curious mixture of amusement and exasperation and something that Karen couldn't quite fathom. What did he mean, anyhow, she wondered uncomfortably. And then the discomfort passed. After all, it was easy to brush aside anything that Barry Gage said if you didn't want to answer. He was so consistently courteous, never bullied, was never persistent.

"It's a date, then? I'll warn Molly to get in enough for two hungry men instead of one."

"That," Barry said, accepting her change of subject with



complete equanimity, "sounds perfectly frightful - and I'm not going to take any notice of it! I'm coming to dinner with you to-morrow night, Miss Winter, and if you choose to feed me on one boiled egg and bread and butter, I hope I'm too much of a gentleman to complain! I'll be waiting for you downstairs at six o'clock - six, mind you, and none of your seven-thirties - and I will provide transportation."

. . . . .

Molly was interested and a little curious when Karen told her that evening of their extra guest.

"I hope you don't mind, Moll? But I thought as you were doing a man-style dinner, we might as well make it for two. And Mr. Gage is an awfully nice soul."

Molly looked faintly disappointed. You didn't describe men as nice souls if you had any sentimental interest in them. She sighed, unconsciously. Even she had noticed that Kay had been looking sort of excited lately - rather bright about the eyes - and romantic Molly had wondered if something more than the job mightn't be responsible. Of course, going to Elstree must have been rather thrilling, and Kay - queer creature that she was - loved all the responsibility that her Mr. Hallett piled on her shoulders, but Molly would have liked to believe that something more was in the wind. When Kay first announced that she was bringing this Mr. Gage home to dinner, Molly had known an instant's exciting hope. . . .

She sighed and resigned it, telling herself that she ought to know better by now than to expect romance from Karen.

"I don't mind a bit," she said, "only Jim said something about going to the flicks after dinner. There's something he wants to see. Would you come, too? Or stay here?"

Karen thought swiftly, scheming on Steven Hallett's behalf as she could never have schemed on her own. If she could get Barry Gage all to herself, comfortably and quietly over the fire in the little sitting-room, mightn't she

be able to persuade him? . . . She nodded, coming to a decision.

"I think we'll stay here - unless he specially wants to go, of course. I'd be rather glad of a chance of a quiet talk with him."

Hope flickered again in Molly's eyes. This time Karen saw it, laughed and shook her head.

"A business talk, my dear!" she amplified. And, knowing Karen, Molly reluctantly believed her.

## CHAPTER X

NEXT MORNING something that Karen had almost ceased to hope for happened. Steven Hallett again invited her out to dinner – and invited her for that night!

"And this time," he said lightly, "you're not going to turn me down . . . we've got lots of things to talk about. . . ."

There was something warm and intimate in his expression that set her heart pumping. She could see his surprise as she didn't answer, but sat looking at him with miserable eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Hallett, I can't——"

His eyebrows shot up.

"Not having dinner with Mr. Gage again?"

"No," she blurted out miserably. "I mean yes – that's to say, he's coming home to dinner with me. . . ."

Sheer astonishment wiped the smile from his face. He looked at her keenly, curiously. Said, rather drily, as if – but he couldn't be! – he were rather offended:

"Well, that's that."

She thought, sharply unhappy: He's angry. He'll never ask me again. She said, desperately, as he picked up a letter and began to read it:

"You see – he said he'd like to come to dinner with us, and Molly – the girl I share a flat with – has her *fancé* coming. And I thought – I mean, he's always been friendly, I thought I could get him to help——"

He had been watching her closely, with narrowed eyes, as she spoke. She thought – but it must have been imagination, she told herself – that his expression cleared a little

when she mentioned Molly. And it was so terribly important that he should understand.

"You know" - she almost whispered the words - "what you said - about——"

His face lit up.

"Propaganda? That's why you're giving old Gage a dinner, is it? That's a clever move, my dear!"

Odd and inconsistent of her, of course, but she hated the sound of it. Hated her real motive, her scheming being dragged into the open, even if Steven Hallett did seem so pleased. She said, almost defensively:

"Of course, I like Mr. Gage. He's been awfully decent to me."

"I'm sure he has!" Hallett returned heartily. There was a moment's silence, while Kay listened to the agonising beat of her heart.

She'd never felt like this before. She'd enjoyed using her brains, her wits. She'd felt there was nothing - nothing - she wouldn't do for Steven Hallett. And now she was unreasonable to wish that she hadn't done this particular thing. Hallett noticed her discomfort, and said quickly:

"And, of course, you're doing Gage a good turn. Even though you think his behaviour has been perfectly correct. . . ."

Karen clutched at the thought, and a little of her unhappiness went.

"I'm frightfully disappointed, though. . . ."

Her eyes were very wide, very appealing. She didn't know - and she would hardly have cared if she had known - that her whole heart was in them. Hallett said, comfortingly.

"You mustn't be! Listen, to-morrow's Saturday. How'd you like to come out to the club with me, and watch the flying? Then we could come back to town and have dinner, instead of to-night?"

For a minute she was almost dizzy with sheer happiness.

The wide eyes were as starry with delight as they had been dark with unhappiness.

"I'd love it!" she told him, and her breath came in a little gasp. "Oh, I'd love it!"

"That's fixed, then! I'll have to pick you up after lunch - I've an appointment I can't break. And if Gage tries to make any dates with you, you can just tell him you're engaged!"

"I will, indeed!" she promised fervently.

His amused eyes followed her as she left the room. She was a good kid, and very useful to him. It wouldn't hurt him to spend a little while giving her a good time.

Besides, after all, she was a darned attractive piece. . . .

She was still alight with excitement when she went down to join Barry Gage at five minutes past six that evening. He was waiting outside for her at the wheel of his car, and he looked at his watch with mock ferocity as she appeared.

"Five minutes more, young woman, and I'd have fetched you by the scruff of the neck! You ought to know better than to keep a hungry man waiting!"

She laughed contentedly as she slipped into the seat beside him.

"That's a nice way to talk to your hostess! You'll get that boiled egg after all, if you're not careful!"

"I don't know," he said under his breath, as he swung the car deftly through the traffic, "that I should mind even that!"

He turned and looked down at her for a fleeting second as he spoke, and she was surprised and vaguely disturbed by something she saw in his eyes. A moment later she had told herself that, of course, it was only imagination. And yet, for some reason, she felt unaccountably shy. . . . Shy, with Mr. Gage!

A few minutes later he was telling her firmly to call him Barry.



"Mr. and Miss are all very well for office use," he proclaimed, "but I shan't eat that steak with any enjoyment if we're being so beautifully formal. Steak, mark you, miss, not egg!"

That was like Barry. He'd got such a comfortable way of being ridiculous. Of bridging the faintest suspicion of awkwardness with some piece of nonsense. Karen laughed.

"All right, *Barry*!" she said, with mocking emphasis. "And let's hope that it is steak—for I've left you entirely to Molly's tender mercies. . . ."

He made another of those disconcerting remarks.

"And I'm sure they're tenderer than yours!"

For a moment she was uncertain whether or not to take him seriously. And then she saw that he was smiling, that warm, friendly smile that made you forget that he was, really, rather plain, rather uninteresting. Or, perhaps, made you feel that it didn't matter. She was entirely at her ease again by the time they reached the entrance to the flats.

"All right to leave the car here?"

"I think so. We don't have many callers with cars, but some of the other people do, and they seem to leave them here for ages."

"That's all right, then," he murmured, "and I like the hospitable sound of that 'ages.'"

They were climbing the stairs now. Karen said, "Oh—I'd forgotten to warn you. Molly and her young man are going to the pictures after dinner. We can go, too, if you like. Or if you think you won't be bored, you can just sit and smoke and talk."

He shot her another look with that queer quality in it but she missed it.

"If *you* won't be bored," he said, "I'd like nothing better than to sit and smoke—and talk——"

"That's settled, then," she agreed carelessly, fitting her key into the lock and pushing the door open. "You there, Molly? Here's Mr. Gage."

Molly made a brief appearance in the door of the kitchenette, wrapped in an overall, with a palette knife in her hand.

"I'm so glad you could come - I've heard so much about you from Kay - Jim's in the sitting-room - go in and do hostess, Kay, till I'm ready!" she observed all in one breath. "I can't shake hands, mine are all greasy——"

She exchanged friendly smiles with Barry Gage, and retreated to her kitchen thinking, almost angrily: He's a dear - anyone can see that. And he's interested in Kay. If only she weren't such an idiot. And, oh, gosh! is that steak trying to burn? . . .

The two men took to one another at first sight. Seeing them side by side, Karen was astonished to realise that Barry Gage wasn't, after all, quite as "ordinary" as Jim. She had only known him before at the office, and, of course, she thought swiftly, Steven Hallett made almost every other man seem "ordinary" . . . even Ian Foster, for all his looks and charm.

Leaving them to entertain one another for a few minutes, she escaped to her room, tossed down hat and coat, ran a comb through her hair, and fluffed her nose with her powder-puff. Returned, to find them gossiping amicably about cars. Jim, although his hopes of even the cheapest baby model lay in the indistinct future, was, like most men, interested in them, and Barry was talking shop with the greatest amiability. They paused automatically as Karen came in.

"Don't stop because of me!" she ordered. "I'm rather interested in cars myself, though I find it hard to get some people to believe it!"

Barry laughed.

"That's one for me!" he acknowledged. "I'm afraid I can't believe that Kay's really interested in mechanics. . . .

She noted subconsciously how swiftly he had adopted "Kay," discarding Karen for the more intimate abbreviative.

"You've just got to believe it," she said. "Why shouldn't I be interested? Don't be so old-fashioned - to listen to you, one would think that there weren't as many women driving cars to-day as there are men. . . ."

"There are moments," Barry sighed teasingly, "when I wish that there weren't——" He held up a defensive hand as she reached for a cushion. "Hey - *kamerad*! Why, I'll even teach you to drive some day, if you're a good girl!"

She forgot even her mock annoyance in her delight.

"Oh, Barry, will you? That would be heavenly - I'd simply adore it! Even though I'll probably never have a car of my own."

"Oh, you never know——" he said lightly.

A step outside the door announced Molly's approach, and Jim, who knew the routine, sprang to the door. She appeared, tray laden.

"Come on, people, you've got to eat this while it's hot. Have you opened that beer, Jim?"

"Bossing me round already!" Jim protested, with secret delight.

Molly scolded:

"What's the good of having a man round, if he can't make himself useful! Leave them alone, Kay! You're no good with a corkscrew, anyhow, and when there are two men in the place . . ."

She had shed her overall, and her cheeks were still pink from her devoted vigil over the gas-stove. The steak was perfectly grilled - almost a cinder outside, and melting inside. A savoury odour rose from the onions. Barry eyed his plate with frank greed.

"Now that," he said, with a wink at Jim, "is what I call a real feminine job. I suppose it takes Kay all her time to - boil an egg!"

"It does!" Karen said viciously. Molly laughed.

"Don't you believe her! She's a better cook than I am when she likes."

It was a jolly, friendly, little meal, and, as Kay had described it the night before, man-style, finishing with hunks of cheese and crisp biscuits, and with very fragrant coffee to follow. Barry Gage made an excuse to escape to the hall, and reappeared with a bottle of Benedictine.

"So that was the funny bulge in your pocket!" Kay remarked. He grinned cheerfully.

"A tribute to the cook! You see I kept it up my sleeve till she had proved her mettle!"

"Lucky we got some liqueur glasses at Woolworth's," Molly contributed. "We thought they looked pretty, though we didn't expect to use them much!"

They sat together round the fire for a short time, talking idly and comfortably, and the more she saw of Barry Gage, the more passionately Molly wished that Karen wasn't such an idiot about that precious independence of hers. Of course, he wasn't Jim – her blue eyes rested for a moment on her *fiancé* with loving content – but he was terribly nice, and probably a good deal better off than Jim was, which would suit Karen. Molly was vaguely afraid of what the future might hold for Kay . . . it would have added the last touch to her own happiness if she could only have known that Kay was engaged to someone like this, someone you could be sure would look after her, and be tender with her . . . and you could see with half an eye that the man was crazy about her. Even Jim noticed that. He said later, as they were on their way to the local cinema :

"Nice chap, that. Think Kay's falling?"

And Molly, always honest, had to shrug her shoulders.

"I wish she were. But I'm dreadfully afraid that she isn't."

## CHAPTER XI

IN THE ROOM THEY HAD LEFT BEHIND, a certain sense of restraint was falling on Karen and Barry Gage.

For a while, after the door had closed on Jim and Molly, they had talked on, lazily, amiably, Karen curled up in one of the big chairs, Barry leaning back opposite her, his head comfortably worked into the cushion behind it. And then, by slow degrees, the conversation became desultory, and silences were longer.

For each was thinking, now that they were alone, of the things they wanted to say, and still feeling for an opening to introduce the subject nearest their heart.

Karen got it first. Or rather, was first to speak on a very slight excuse. Barry had been so friendly, so kind, so unalarming . . . had ragged so cheerfully, and got on so swimmingly with both Molly and Jim, that he didn't feel in the least like a stranger any longer, and she had no longer that nourished resentment of his previous snub. This time, she thought, he wouldn't snub her.

She leant forward, her cheeks touched by the light of the fire, her eyes very wide, her face very earnest.

"Barry," she said, "you know what we discussed - that evening at Alessandro's. . . ."

His face was partly in shadow, where the wide arm of his chair cut it off from the firelight, and the shaded light from the lamp reached it only incompletely, but as far as she could see, his expression did not alter.

"Yes."

"Have you thought any more about it?"



"I can't say that I have."

The warm friendliness had dropped from his voice. It was cool, impersonal, and should have warned her. But she didn't want to be warned.

She said "Oh," and then, guilefully: "I thought perhaps you had. Things haven't been - quite so difficult——"

"No?" The monosyllable was dry, unencouraging. "If I remember rightly, I suggested then that if you minded your own business things would probably work themselves out in time."

"They seem to be doing it." She had the baffling impression that she was pushing hard against a brick wall, that refused to yield. She went on coaxingly: "And isn't it a good thing, seeing that Mr. Bamfield's coming back soon?"

"Oh, very!" more drily than ever.

She began to chafe a little.

"Aren't you glad?"

He drawled, infuriatingly: "To be candid, I can't say that I am. Frankly, I'm not very interested either way."

"I think that's rotten of you!" she flashed. "You don't mean to say that you wouldn't care if some of the staff got the sack? Just because they've stuck to you?"

Barry sat up.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Well, they might have been, mightn't they? If Mr. Bamfield came back and found things as they were a short time ago——"

The man leant back in his chair and laughed.

"It would have been just too bad for Mr. Steven Hallett, that's all!"

It was Karen's turn to be surprised.

"What do you mean?"

"My dear girl, what's the use of a manager who can't manage? A man who can't control his staff——"

She burst out angrily :

"Control his staff? He's handled them far too gently - that's the only trouble! In his shoes I'd have sacked half of them myself——"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't! They've all been with the firm a lot longer than Hallett has, and the Old Man knows every one of 'em. I don't suppose Hallett could sack them if he wanted to - and if he had tried it on there would have been an unholy rumpus when the Old Man got back - unless there was much better cause for complaint than there ever has been. He'd have sifted things to the bottom - and Hallett wouldn't have enjoyed the result very much."

Karen said, scathingly :

"So you *are* jealous of him, after all!"

There was a short pause. And then, to her vast astonishment, Barry Gage got to his feet. Stood on the hearthrug towering over her, and acknowledged, deliberately, bitterly :

"You've hit the mark! I am - damn jealous! But you're wrong about one thing."

He waited a moment, and then said, very levelly :

"I'm not jealous about the job. He put a swift one over on me when he wormed his way into the Old Man's graces, and I've every right to be sore about it. But I think you'll admit that I've accepted the situation and have behaved more or less decently. I'm not against him - but I'm certainly not for him."

"But——" she said puzzled.

"What I'm jealous about" - the confession was slow and rather tense, "more fool that I am - is the way he dazzles you!"

Karen sat up in swift protest.

"Oh, yes, he does! You think he's marvellous; you fall for every showy trick the man's got; you work yourself like a slave for him; you cover up his mistakes——"

A faint exclamation of dismay escaped her. Barry paused, and smiled ironically.

"Yes; you forgot, didn't you, when you wrote to Jones Brothers for him, explaining so carefully that *you* made the mistake in typing that schedule, that I checked those figures with you, and every one was as Hallett had worked it out! I'd be a bigger fool than I am if I didn't guess what happened; and what d'you expect me to think of a man who lies and hides behind his secretary to cover up a piffling mistake? What d'you expect me to think of a *manager* who sends his secretary to get an order-form signed, so that he can grab all the honour and glory, and not have to credit any poor devil of a salesman with the commission?"

Karen said, stiff-lipped:

"It wasn't for that——"

"Oh, yes, it was! It's not the first time he's played that mean little trick; he wants to run round and get all the orders he can personally, so that he can show the boss what a brilliant salesman he is! I laugh these things off when they talk about them in the showroom, but I'm not going to laugh them off to you. It makes me sick to see how you swallow it all — how it flatters you when he dumps responsibility on your shoulders, expects you to do all sorts of things that aren't your job——"

"I like the responsibility!" Karen flashed. "That's one reason I like Mr. Hallett so much — he doesn't expect me to be just a machine."

A short silence fell, and when Barry spoke again the anger had gone out of his voice.

"I shouldn't have said all those things," he observed quietly, "but I'm human. I hold my tongue where the rest of the world is concerned, but I can't do it with you, Kay. You see, it rather knocks me off my balance when I see that — that little tick is the only thing in the world that matters to you!"

He waited a moment, and then, to her intense dismay, bent over and took her hands very gently.

"Listen, Kay — am I wrong? Have I just been — imagining things?"

Clinging tight to her self-possession, she nodded quickly.

"Of course you have! Because Mr. Hallett is nice to work for — because I like my job so much, you've no business to think that I——"

The words were hurried, vehement. She thought, passing her tongue over dry lips . . . he mustn't think that . . . nobody must know what a fool I am. She tried, unsuccessfully, to pull her hands away from his clasp.

"Then, Kay, you must know I'm crazy about you——"

She was still angry with him, furiously angry, for prying so dangerously near to her secret. Even belief that she had dispelled his suspicions did not calm her strung-up nerves. And now——

With a passionate movement, she tore her hands from his.

"Oh!" she cried angrily, "why can't you let me alone! You told me to mind my own business once — why can't you mind yours? Let me get on with my job in peace."

She had jumped to her feet now, and stood facing him. That he should dare to try and make love to her, after saying all those abominable things about Steven — just because he was jealous — of her, *and* the job, she told herself recklessly. Hands tightly clenched, eyes bright with resentment, she stamped her foot. "I hate you!" she cried, hardly knowing what she was saying.

At that his face changed. Hardened queerly. She threw back her head, and her eyes met his for a long minute, angry, defiant, challenging. And then, suddenly, so unexpectedly that she never guessed what he was doing, or had any chance to elude him, Barry Gage had caught her in his arms.

"Hate me, do you! Then we might as well make a job of it!" He laughed oddly, and held her with irresistible strength, though she struggled fiercely against him. Slowly, inexorably, with a passion that frightened her, he tilted her face upwards, and his mouth was on hers. . . .



When his arms slackened at last, she was appalled to find herself so faint, so dizzy, that she could hardly stand. He set her down, very gently, in the chair from which she had sprung, and stood looking down at her, an inscrutable expression in his eyes. Almost automatically, his hand went to push back the hair which her struggling had ruffled. And then, standing very straight, he bowed to her formally.

"Good night, Miss Winter! I'm afraid I have abused your hospitality. I apologise."

She was still staring after him, when she heard the door of the flat close. A few minutes later, the hum of his starter sounded in the street below.

. . . . .

When Molly got back that night, she was amazed to find the flat in complete darkness. Half wondering if Karen had gone out for a run in the car with that nice Mr. Gage, she softly opened her bedroom door, and switched on the light, only to hear a voice from the bed protest irritably:

"Put it out, Molly! It hurts my eyes."

"Why, Kay——"

Molly obediently switched off again, and tiptoed over to the bed in the shaft of light which came from the sitting-room door, but Karen had hunched herself in the bed-clothes again, and the set of her shoulder showed very plainly that she wanted to be left alone.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing. I've got a headache, that's all."

Molly laid a cool hand on a forehead undoubtedly feverish.

"You poor kid - shall I get you some aspirin?"

"No thanks. I took some. It's nothing - I shall be all right in the morning. It's nothing, really."

Her head remained obstinately burrowed into the pillow, lest Molly should catch a glimpse, even in the uncertain light, of her swollen, reddened eyes.



"All right, then." Molly's voice held a matter-of-factness that she was very far from feeling. "I'll leave you in peace. Hope you'll be all right in the morning."

Her face was grave and troubled as she went off quietly to her own room. Something had happened to upset Kay - but what? Surely nothing that Barry Gage had said or done?

## CHAPTER XII

KAREN WOKE IN THE MORNING with that heavy feeling which always follows an unhappy falling asleep. And yet, even as she stretched her arms and blinked and turned to look at the clock, she knew there was something which made to-day particularly exciting. And then, memory skipped the unpleasant happenings of the night before, and she remembered what the something was.

She was to go out with Steven this afternoon.

The thought galvanised her to action. Made her leap out of bed and reach hastily for her dressing-gown. She'd got to be quick this morning.

She had made up her mind the day before that, extravagance or no extravagance, she'd have to get a new suit or a new coat or something. Steven was taking her to the Flying Club... people would know him there, and though of course she was his secretary, she didn't want to look just his secretary. Besides, the age-old urge of women to make themselves attractive for their lovers was working in her. Any woman in love knows how important the moral effect of new clothes can be, how the matter becomes even more desperately urgent than it is at normal times.

She was splashing about in the bathroom before Molly, usually first, had got out of bed. She had dismissed Barry Gage and his sudden madness from her mind, though she did experience a twinge of discomfort when she thought of having to meet him that morning in the office. But for the moment her mind was engrossed with ways and means.

She had yesterday's pay envelope quite intact. And a

pound or two she had been laying aside to put in the Savings Bank. That would have to do. She could have borrowed from Molly — who usually kept money in hand these days of trousseau and household linen buying — and paid her back when she had had time to draw the money out, but she didn't want to do that. It would have meant explaining, and she didn't want to explain anything this morning.

Molly looked up sharply from laying the breakfast-table as she came out of the bathroom, and passed through the sitting-room. Looked relieved as she noted the brightness of Karen's eyes, the springiness in her walk. Told herself that she must be mistaken, after all. Last night's headache must have been genuine and natural.

"You're all right this morning?"

"Right as rain!" Karen assured her blithely. "Told you I would be. Just a sudden headache, that's all."

"You're early——"

"Had to be" — Karen was in her bedroom now, slipping into faint pink silk, pulling thin stockings over her long, slim, shapely legs — "I want to do some shopping on the way to the office."

"But it's Saturday. You could do it this afternoon."

"Shan't have time!" Sheer happiness carolled in her voice. "I'm going out."

Molly paused. Karen going out? Of course, she did, quite often, but it wasn't that sort of going out. No feminine woman could have failed to grasp the fact that the lilt in Kay's words meant "going out with a man — *the* man." Molly gasped. Rallied her wits quickly, and managed to speak as if it hardly mattered.

"With Mr. Gage?"

"No!"

Complete change of tone. Anger, dislike, contempt. Molly was getting more and more bewildered.

In her room, brushing the thick glory of her hair with sharp, vigorous strokes, Karen was thinking quickly.

Should she tell Molly? Shouldn't she? How much would Molly guess, beyond what she told?

"As a matter of fact, I'm going out with my boss."

A stunned silence from the sitting-room told its own story. Dancing to the door of her bedroom, Karen looked out, laughing. "How's that, Molly? He asked me yesterday. He's taking me out to the Flying Club in the afternoon, and then on to dinner somewhere. I suppose" - she managed to bring out the words as if she really meant them - "he thinks I've been working so hard I deserve a reward. I'm going shopping because I want to look my darnedest."

And that was that. Without waiting to see the effect of her words, Karen darted back to her dressing-table, and began to slip in the pins which held her curls in place. Felt rather baffled when Molly said briefly and quite evenly:

"Then you'll want breakfast in a hurry - I'll see to it, Kay."

Boiling the kettle, frying bacon, making toast, in the tiny kitchenette, Molly was far from being as serene as she had sounded. This was something she'd never expected . . . the sort of thing that had never happened before. And now that it had happened, it was strangely worrying.

"If it were anyone but Kay," Molly fretted to herself. "Kay - going out with her boss! If it had even been with that nice Barry Gage. . . . Something's gone wrong there, though."

She cheered herself up firmly. After all, what was there to worry about? Wasn't Kay always level-headed - too level-headed? Wouldn't it be good for Kay to behave more humanly, more like other girls, to go about a bit, not just with other girls, but with men, to sink that silly, independent spirit of hers and act like a human being? And even if it was her boss, he might be a perfectly nice man. . . .

Molly halted her thoughts. In spite of all Kay said, in

spite of all Kay's enthusiasm, she didn't like the sound of Steven Hallett.

The kettle, boiling angrily over, cut short her cogitations. She made the tea swiftly, and carried it into the sitting-room. Shooed Kay out just as soon as breakfast was finished.

"I'll clear up this morning," Molly insisted, good sport that she was. "Off you go — and don't be too extravagant, even if it is your boss!"

. . . . .

Karen was aware of a rising tide of excitement as she slipped off the bus at Victoria, and hurried along to the little shop where she had bought the green dress. She had thrown a longing thought at the window in Bond Street, where she had seen the marvellous frock, and for one reckless minute was tempted to make for that instead, but a swift and rueful recollection of the amount of money she had to spend brought common sense to the surface again. Some day — she promised herself fiercely, comforting herself with the thought that the little shop in Victoria, if it wasn't imposing, and didn't produce Bond Street fabrics, did produce an amazingly good cut.

It was just open as she got there at a couple of minutes after nine, and the girl who had served her before was arranging frocks on the racks. Recognising Karen, she came quickly forward, with a friendly smile. A nice girl, Kay thought, the sort of girl who would understand.

"I want" — she hesitated — "a little suit, I think. Something very plain and tailored-looking, you know . . ."

With a swift glance, the shop assistant reassessed her measurements.

"What colour, madam?"

"Green, I thought. . . ."

"I don't know that we've got anything in green . . . would you care to look?"

It was the quickest way. Karen went over with her to



the long rack. There was only one green suit, and it had an unfortunately fussy collar. Their eyes met, and the assistant pushed it firmly back.

"Not your style at all, madam. But I've got a nice one, I know, in blue . . . or beige. . . ."

Beige. A foolish, extravagant colour.

It was more of a stone beige. A clever, knobbly, light-weight woollen, with smart, unobtrusive buttons and a well-cut skirt. Karen hesitated. In her mind's eye she was adding touches of green – a scarf, maybe, or a new bag if she could run to one after paying for the suit. Silly, of course, and not a bit practical, it would soil so easily. The girl smiled sympathetically.

"Suppose you try it on?"

Karen clutched at sober cold sense.

"I might. But bring the blue one, too. I've got to be very quick."

After all, she never even tried on the blue suit. The minute she saw the beige in the glass, she knew she was lost. It might be a three-guinea thing, out of a tiny unimportant shop, but it had something. How much she herself contributed to that something Karen didn't realise. But the shop assistant, eyeing the flush in her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes, knew, and experienced a swift rush of sympathy.

She's in love, thought the shop assistant, and she's going out with *him*. . . .

She smoothed the trim waist with an almost affectionate hand. Men liked you to look smart. A man mightn't know that the little ready-made fitted the girl like a glove – but he'd be aware of its charm all the same.

"It's nice, isn't it? Might have been made for you."

Karen nodded swiftly.

"Yes. I'll take it."

She was thinking . . . people – smart people – wear suits like this. I'll feel all *right*, even at the Flying Club. Not noticeable. I won't have that "just a secretary" look.

She had a pair of small brown broguish shoes that would fall into the picture. And a beret would be all right. You've got, she thought without bitterness, to scheme things out when you haven't much money.

She scurried back to the bus stop, with the little suit in its box under her arm, and the crumpled bill in her bag. The sun was shining, and there was a golden glow over the whole world. People in the streets seemed to be walking more briskly, looking happier. The bus conductor was whistling melodiously as they swung along Victoria Street. Karen smiled sympathetically, catching his eye.

The world's full of nice people, she thought idiotically, and then, remembering Barry Gage, scowled.

Actually, meeting him again was less painful than she had thought it would be. He was so entirely matter of fact, so restrained, that she found it hard to believe that he could have behaved so outrageously the night before. If his pleasantly ugly face was a little set, a little tense, she failed to notice it. Her thoughts were too excitedly full of the day before her.

Steven Hallett was not in yet. She ripped open the mail briskly, methodically, sorted it into piles on his desk, carried off a few letters to deal with herself, and sat down to her typewriter, ears strained to catch the sound of his footfall next door. A sort of impatience began to seethe in her as the morning dragged away and he did not appear.

Phone calls came through for him, and she took them, trying to concentrate on the work, and finding it oddly irksome.

Eleven o'clock. . . .

She visited his office again, took some more of the letters. Rang up a customer who had asked him to ring before twelve to explain the position . . . it was all right, and would Mr. Hallett call him on Monday morning instead?

More typing, and a brief argument with the colourless Miss Rowson about one of the files.

Eleven-thirty . . . twelve. . . .

The door of his room opened, and she sprang involuntarily to her feet. But it was only one of the salesmen wanting to make a report.

Half past twelve . . . he must be here any minute, now.

Somehow, it never occurred to her that he might not be coming. He'd got to come. He'd said he would pick her up after lunch, but in all probability he didn't even know her address. She turned an unconsciously agonised eye on the box that contained the little beige suit, and her heart sank into her shoes.

Twenty to one. . . .

Obedying his standing instructions, she signed the letters on his behalf. Sent them out to the post. Went to wash her hands and powder her nose, aghast to find that the hand holding the powder-puff was trembling, that the corners of her mouth were set and rigid.

One o'clock. . . .

The rest of the staff were going. This was Saturday. She could hear cheerful voices outside discussing the afternoon's programme. One of the men was going racing. One of the girls rushing off for a country week-end. There was an air of cheerful bustle about the whole place. Karen felt chilled, miserable, out of it all. At twenty past one she put on her hat and coat and left the office with dragging steps, the dress box under her arm.

He had undoubtedly forgotten all about her and his promise to take her out.

## CHAPTER XIII

MOLLY WAS OUT WITH JIM, and wouldn't be back until late in the evening. Drearily, Karen forced herself to eat the cold ham and salad she had picked up at the delicatessen and taken in with her. Tried to read a book, and found the print blurring before her eyes. Went to her room and unpacked the little beige suit and thought she would try it on. And then hadn't the heart to do it. Picked up a jumper she was knitting, and took it back with her to the sitting-room. Turned on the wireless, and tried to conquer the ache in her heart.

Something must, of course, have happened to keep Steven Hallett from the office this morning. Something especially important, of course. He very often didn't come in on Saturday mornings, and so none of the rest of the staff had wondered at his non-appearance. But he must have known she'd be expecting him.

He might at least have phoned, she thought miserably. Perhaps he just forgot all about it. Perhaps something more amusing came along. Stinging tears rose to her eyes.

She'd been looking forward so to the afternoon. She'd imagined herself, walking at Steven Hallett's side over the grass of the flying field, having tea with him, sitting beside him in the big cream sports car he drove. It would have been a lovely afternoon, anyhow . . . but because it was to be spent with Steven Hallett, it was going to be marvellous. And now . . .

Now she was sitting here, all alone in the flat, knitting a jumper. A fat tear rolled down her cheek and splashed on to the wool.

He might have let her know !

It would have been bad enough, anyhow, if he had called the appointment off. But it wouldn't have left her with this horrible, let-down feeling. This horrid dragging ache in her heart.

She jumped to her feet with a nervous start, her tears drying suddenly, as the door bell shrilled.

The hope that had sprung to life - had he come for her after all? - died a quick death at the sight of the short shadow against the glass of the front door. But there was a faint flicker of comfort in finding a telegraph boy on the mat, with a wire in his hand for "Winter." A letting-up of the pain when she tore it open and saw that the signature was really "Hallett."

A moment later the boy was clattering down the stairs, and Karen was back in the sitting-room, the telegram clutched in her hand. He hadn't forgotten at all . . .

It was a long, extravagant message. An unexpected matter of personal business had cropped up - he'd thought he would get to the office in time, now he was afraid he wouldn't be free until very late. But when he was free, he would come round to the flat in the hope of finding her. Her heart began to thud in her breast, slowly, heavily, and the blood beat through her veins. And then, galvanised into action, she snatched up the jumper, thrust it away in a drawer, tore out of her office frock, and dashed into the tiny bathroom.

Splashing with cold water can do a lot for eyes that are red and unhappy - but happiness can do more. He was coming for her, even if it were late before he was free. She looked at herself in the tiny mirror, cheeks bright from their vigorous sponging, eyes alight, mouth curved . . . dashed back into the bedroom and began to dress.

After the soft green jumper was pulled over her head - it wasn't new, but it had always been becoming - she draped a towel carefully over her shoulders, and made up. Delicately, carefully, with more than usual deliberation.



Even raided Molly's room for Molly's special foundation cream, and Molly's mascara.

Under the faint dusting of powder her cheeks glowed, peachy tan. Carefully, she reddened the curve of her mouth with lipstick. Lightly brushed lashes and brows. Struggled with a hand-mirror to see the set of the curls at the back of her head. Threw the towel aside, and stepped carefully into the beige skirt.

It did fit nicely. Now the coat. It set gaily on her shoulders, snugged in at the waist. "It isn't so bad!" she thought, her heart lightening every minute.

It wasn't so bad, but she never guessed how much it owed to the wearer. To a pair of erect shoulders, a high-held head, a laughing face and a riot of red-gold curls. Then, as she looked, her face fell, and she began to wonder feverishly if she should, after all, wear the suit. Suppose he really didn't arrive till late, would he expect to find her wearing evening dress? Because she hadn't an evening dress that she really liked.

Without realising it, she was thinking far more about clothes these days than she had ever done before. She'd always been happiest in the old days not to bother about them. There hadn't been any reason to bother. It mattered so little, after all, what she wore when she went out with Molly and Jim, and she had gone out so little otherwise. Now it was all so different.

She looked at herself again, and went to the wardrobe. Considered the old black taffetas and the old green *crêpe-de-Chine*, and shook her head. She'd rather stick to the little beige suit. Its newness, its gaiety, gave her a feeling of self-confidence.

So she closed the door of the wardrobe firmly, and went back to try and settle down in the sitting-room. Looked at her hands, and then at the clock, swithered a moment, and then fetched her manicure box. He couldn't be here till ever so much later.

And all the same, her hands trembled with nervous

eagerness as she wiped off the varnish and pressed back the cuticles. And she painted her nails again with the new coral varnish Molly had brought her from the salon the other day.

That was done at last. Nail white emphasised the pretty shape of her hands. They were white now and faintly fragrant - she had raided Molly's room again in search of hand lotion. She looked at the clock again and sighed - how slowly the hands travelled.

It was half-past six before the door bell whirled again. She'd been trying to knit, to read, to do some darning. She had made herself tea, and gulped it down. The colour in her cheeks had faded a little, with eagerness and anxiety, and now it flooded back again. She was radiant and excited, for all her efforts at self-control, as she threw open the door and found Steven Hallett standing outside. And he noted all that, pleased and amused, and faintly stirred by the expression in her eyes.

He said :

" I hope I'm forgiven——"

" Of course ! " She was half shy, half eager. After all, he was her boss, and this was the first time they had met like this, out of the office. " Won't you come in ? "

He followed her into the little flat.

" I don't usually behave so badly, you know, but something very important cropped up this morning——" There was a tense note in his voice. " I discovered last night that Old Man Bamfield sailed on an earlier boat, and gets back to the office on Tuesday. So I set out to get that contract from Wilsons - wanted it on the books before he arrived - and, by gosh, I got it ! "

" You did ! " It was all there in her voice, all that he wanted to hear. The excitement, the admiration. He nodded, pleased.

" I did. I knew you would understand."

" Of course I do ! "

She was glowing. Of course she understood ! Of course,

if she had known, she would have wanted him to do just what he had done. It was all gone now, all forgotten, the dreariness and the let-down feeling, and the unhappy hours.

He said :

"We've got the devil of a lot to do on Monday." And then, brusquely, "But I can tell you about that later. What are we going to do? Like to run out into the country somewhere and have some dinner?"

"I'd love it!"

She didn't care what they did, really. But this would be marvellous.

"Right. Come along, then. Want a coat? Better bring one - you may be cold in the car."

She thought quickly. She didn't want to wear her own coat . . . she wore that to the office every day. But Molly had one of those Teddy Bear things. She fetched it out of Molly's wardrobe, pulled the brown beret over her riotous curls, went in with the coat over her arm. Hallett eyed her approvingly. A darned attractive girl, she was. They went down the stairs again.

The big cream car looked very opulent, very West End, standing outside the modest block of flats. Karen was taut with excitement as she slipped into the seat. This couldn't be Karen Winter, actually Karen Winter. . . .

He had pulled off his hat, stuffed it carelessly into the hood, and she stole a glance at his well-cut profile as he steered the car out into the main road, slipping dexterously round a bus and bluffing a taxi into making way for him.

"Great West, I think," he said, as he drew to a stop at traffic lights. "Know Barnaby's? Not a bad spot, and they give you a decent dinner for a roadhouse."

She'd heard of Barnaby's, of course. Very smart and very fashionable. Just the sort of place you'd expect Steven Hallett to go to.

He said :

"I didn't know the Old Man was due so soon. I want to

have all sorts of facts and figures to lay before him. Show him just how things have bucked up."

"How you've bucked them up, you mean!" she told him. He grinned faintly.

"Put it that way if you like!" Then he sobered again.

"That's exactly what I do mean! You see" — they were travelling along the by-pass now, and the traffic was sparse, so he turned and looked down into her eyes for a moment — "I told him I'd make things hum — and I've done it. Now I'm going to call his bluff——"

He broke off again to skim round a van that was travelling slowly in their direction.

"You see — I want to be something more than just the Sales Manager. I want an interest in the firm. Hang it all, I make the money for 'em, don't I? If it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't be coming back to find things in the state they are! If he'd let Gage have the job, Gage would have plodded on, all right, but he wouldn't have boosted sales by nearly fifty per cent. So what would have been good enough for Gage isn't good enough for me!"

Karen's intent eyes rested on his face. She waited, almost breathlessly, for him to go on.

"I'm going to lead him up to it gently, mind you. Give him some figures to brood over for a bit. And then, as I said, I shall sting the old boy for an interest. And one of these days I'm going to be on the board."

She thought, tense with excitement, he'll do it. Admiration for his ambition, and pride in his confidence in her stirred her vastly. He smiled down again at her radiant face.

"Me a director — you the secretary of the company. How d'you like the idea?"

Like it? The very thought was intoxicating. The thought that he meant to go ahead like that — and meant her to go with him. Meant them to go on working together, forging ahead together . . . together. . . .

Karen breathed, starry-eyed.

"It would be marvellous!"

"It's going to be!" he assured her confidently. "You won't be sorry, one of these days, for having worked so hard for me."

"I'd never be that—anyhow!" she told him softly. And for a long moment their eyes met and locked, and a queer, electric thrill ran through all her veins.

A moment later the white and green building that housed Barnaby's hove in sight. Swinging the car off the main road into the car park, Steven Hallett helped her out. Smiled a gay, light-hearted smile, and sketched a small wave of his hand.

"And that's all for to-night, Miss Winter! No more business till Monday morning. We're out to enjoy ourselves, and nothing more. And I'm Steven and you're——"

He hesitated. Karen laughed, a small excited laugh, and presented him with her little name.

"I'm Kay!"

"Oh-Kay! Let's go!" He tucked her hand under his arm, and still laughing at his not very brilliant play on the name, they walked into the huge, brilliantly-lit restaurant.



## CHAPTER XIV

KAREN was instantly glad that she had stuck to the little beige suit. There were only three women in evening dress in the entire place, and those three were ultra-smart, exotic, laden with jewels. There were heaps of little suits, little frocks, berets and sweaters. Karen thought swiftly: Thank heaven I didn't change. Either of her two evening frocks would have looked inconceivably dowdy. The little suit was all right.

They evidently knew Steven Hallett at Barnaby's. They found a table for him with no delay, and the waiter addressed him by name. He ordered Martinis, and leant across the table towards her.

"Ever been here before? It's not a bad spot. Goodish band for a roadhouse. And a swimming pool, heated all the year round."

His eyes laughed into hers.

"No rifle range, I'm afraid!"

Karen laughed too. So he still remembered that first encounter.

"I've often wondered what you were doing there all alone...."

"I'd gone with a friend of mine and her *fiancé*," she told him, "and they wanted to do one of those silly side-shows - 'Over the Falls,' I think it was - and hold hands. So I sent them off——"

"You hadn't anyone to hold your hand? That was a shame!"

She stuck her chin in the air.

"I'm not keen on having my hand held," she said. And

then, as the mischievous meaning look came into his eyes, she flushed. But he only said softly, "No?" and smiled again.

Their drinks arrived, and he ordered dinner in consultation with her. She sipped her cocktail slowly, with a rising tide of excitement taking possession of her. More and more people crowded into the place, and some of them waved to Steven, and some of them stared at her curiously. Partly because they had not seen her there before, and partly because she was really lovely that night, with the warm colour in her cheeks, and her eyes warm with happiness, and her bright hair tossed by the wind around her face. She had pulled off the beret and stuffed it into the pocket of the Teddy Bear coat which hung on the back of her chair.

Presently Steven sat up sharply, and said, with a hint of laughter in his voice:

"Good Lord! Look who's here——"

She followed the direction of his eyes across the room. Two men were sitting alone at a table in one of the further corners, and there was no mistaking those broad shoulders, that sandy head. She was glad that her face was flushed already, for she could feel the blood rising to her cheeks.

"Didn't know Gage patronised this sort of place!"

There was a hint of patronage in his voice, but it escaped her.

"That's Haxen, the racing motorist, he's with. You know, Freddy Haxen. . ."

There was an amused twist to Steven Hallett's mouth. Karen wondered vaguely: Haxen . . . I've heard that name before, but where? Not just because he races, but someone said something about him. Hallett answered the unasked question.

"He used to run round a lot with Lucilla Sandle, but she's given him the bird now, for Foster. Marvellous how the fair Lucilla collects 'em."

"She's very lovely——"

"Lovely?" He dismissed that lightly. "Very rich,

you mean ! My dear girl, she's forty if she's a day. Foster's just having her on——"

He paused abruptly, as if he had said something he didn't mean to and shot her a curious glance. Added :

" Personally, when I take a woman out, I prefer to pay the bills."

She thought : Of course. She remembered now where she had heard Haxen's name before. Louise had mentioned it, that day at the beauty parlour. She thought, wondering rather, how odd it was that everyone should seem to know about Mrs. Sandle's affairs. An expression of distaste crossed her face, and, alert to notice it, Hallett changed the subject.

During the rest of the meal they talked mainly nonsense. Hallett was amusing, bold ; ragged her continually, until she had really forgotten altogether that Monday would find her saying, " Yes, Mr. Hallett " and " No, Mr. Hallett," typing his letters, and taking his telephone calls. To-night he had elected to be Steven, and she was Kay.

And yet, though she'd forgotten typing and telephones, she hadn't forgotten the other things that had happened in the office. Something in his eyes reminded her warmly, confusingly, of the two times he had held her in his arms and kissed her. And once, when he held out his cigarette case, and his fingers touched hers as she took one out, she felt the blood go tingling through every vein.

They had reached the stage of coffee and liqueurs, when someone made his way through the tables, and touched him on the shoulder. Swinging round, surprised, as Kay looked up, Hallett gave a quick exclamation.

" Good Lord - is all the world and his girl-friend here to-night ? Or are you off the chain for once ? "

Ian Foster grinned, and jerked his chin over his shoulder.

" Oh, no ! She's here. Wants you to come over and have your coffee with us."

Hallett scowled and began to shake his head. Foster threw an appealing glance at Kay.

"Tell him he's got to, Miss Winter! I'm bored to tears, and we're fighting like a cat and dog!"

Kay thought, in spite of herself, that there was something about Ian Foster you couldn't help liking. A sort of small-boyish cheek. He said:

"Freddy Haxen's here, too, scowling like hell. And Lucilla's trying to make me jealous by smiling sweetly at him. Be a pal, Steve!"

Through a gap in the tables, they could see Lucilla Sandle now. She was one of the few women in evening dress – a black thing, that sheathed her closely – with four inches of heavy diamond bracelet on either wrist, and earrings that winked fire whenever she moved her head. The dark, brilliant eyes under the black lashes, the arched brows, were fixed on Steven Hallett.

"After all," Foster reminded him, "she's a customer, old boy, isn't she?"

Steven had noticed, too, that intent look of Lucilla Sandle's. It had wiped the scowl off his face. He smiled now, and bowed in her direction.

"Damn the woman!" he said quietly. "Foster, I'll have your blood for this! Sorry, Kay, but I suppose we'd better go. As this unspeakable creature points out, she *is* a customer!"

Foster grinned triumphantly, and started to rejoin Mrs. Sandle. Kay rose reluctantly, and Steven came close to her, slipping his hand under her arm.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said softly, as they threaded their way slowly between the tables in Ian Foster's wake. "It's going to spoil my evening, Kay."

She flashed a small, grateful glance up at him. She had just been feeling dismayed that her evening had been spoilt. She hadn't thought it would matter so much to him. He added, swiftly:

"But I know you understand how important it is for us to – humour her."

Tiny, magical word! Us. . . .

When they reached Lucilla's table, Ian Foster was gone again. Hallett looked round for him, and Lucilla laughed.

"I've sent him to bring Freddy Haxen and his friend over! He's being an incredible bore to-night, Mr. Hallett! I couldn't stand it any longer, *tête-à-tête*. So I thought we'd make a party of it! Are you furious with me for dragging you in?"

Hallett smiled down at her; his gayest, most enchanting smile.

"Of course not! We're delighted, aren't we, Kay?"

Karen murmured something indistinctly, and dropped thankfully into a chair, as Lucilla flashed a perfunctory smile at her. "Oh, yes - Miss Summers - of course——"

"Miss Winter!" Steven corrected gently. Lucilla laughed. "Of course! How stupid of me! I never remember names - you must forgive me, Miss Winter!"

(But she remembered Steven's! Karen told herself cynically.)

Apparently Freddy Haxen was taking longer to persuade than Steven had done. Knowing that Barry Gage was with him, Karen couldn't help hoping that he would prove altogether intractable. Things were awkward enough already, and if Barry were added to the party . . . She sat back in her chair, feeling suddenly forlorn and out of things, while Lucilla chattered away to Hallett, and he devoted all his attention to her chatter.

She turned from him quickly enough, however, when Ian Foster returned, and Karen's heart sank when she saw that he had been successful in his errand. Freddy Haxen was close behind him, his dark face set and scowling, followed by Barry Gage. Lucilla Sandle laughed.

"You don't look overjoyed to see me, Freddy!"

He said bluntly, in a rough voice that was tinged with American accent:

"Didn't know I knew you these days, Lucilla! You weren't aware of my existence the last time we met!"



She laughed again, a small delighted laugh, and patted the seat beside her.

"Freddy! You know I'm short-sighted! I suppose you went tearing past me in the street like one of your own racing cars, and expected me to know who it was, when you only looked something like a blur to me. . . ."

"It was at Claridge's!" he said heavily. "And I was sitting at the next table. Trouble is, you're so darned vain - you know you ought to wear glasses, and you won't do it!"

Lucilla Sandle frowned delicately.

"For heaven's sake, Freddy," she complained, "don't be such a boor! I clamoured for company, because Ian was being a bore - don't make me regret I did it!"

Ian Foster chuckled.

"Serve you right if you did, Lucilla!" he told her. "Anyway, now you've got 'em all, you'd better make the best of 'em. This is Barry Gage——"

Karen was sitting, bewildered, feeling like a fish out of water. Barry, who was looking quite expressionless, smiled politely at her as he sat down. Freddy Haxen nodded casually. They went on baiting Lucilla. And gradually Karen began to understand.

Lucilla liked it. It sharpened her wits, made more dangerous the sidewise glances of her dark eyes. She didn't want, to-night, to be the rich Mrs. Sandle . . . she wanted to be Lucilla. To flirt with all these men who were so much younger than she was, to be ragged by them, to match the rapier of her wit against theirs, to be the focus point of their attention. . . .

She achieved her wish all right. Teasing, mock-abuse, pretended insult, all were hurled at her. Nobody had even the time to pass a word with Kay. Only Barry Gage failed to join in the general conversation. Only Barry found time to say something to her. And even as she answered, moderately grateful, she was thinking secretly: It's because he's like me . . . he's out of it here, too." And her

eyes rested with envy and admiration on Steven's animated face and laughing eyes . . . no wonder he forged ahead as he did. He could fall into any situation and carry it off.

Presently, however, having made her own importance sufficiently felt and Karen's isolation sufficiently noticeable, Lucilla took it into her head to be gracious to the only other woman in the party. Dropped even the vague hint of arrogance that had been in her voice when she first spoke to Karen. Was, with a quick switch of attitude, friendly and charming.

Karen forced herself to respond, quietly, diffidently. Hating Lucilla Sandle more with every breath she drew. Hated her most of all when, tiring suddenly of Barnaby's, she suggested that they should all go on to her own house.

"This place is so crowded," the lovely widow announced, surveying the floor with distaste, "and it's full of frightful people to-night. Let's go home, and put on the gramophone, or swim or something. . . ."

As if her lightest whim settled anything finally, she rose, nodded to Foster to settle the bill, and swept them all out with her. Heads turned, as they passed through the restaurant, and curious eyes scanned the party. Lucilla sailed ahead, serenely ignoring the attention she was drawing, Freddy Haxen and Steven on either side of her, Karen bringing up the rear with Barry Gage.

"D'you want to go on?" he asked, under his breath. She shook her head.

"No! I wish I could get away!"

She had forgotten all about that brief, disastrous scene in the flat. Barry Gage was the old Barry - kind, considerate, friendly. He drew closer.

"I'll try to escape. If you want to, I could run you back to town. . . . I suppose Hallett will go along. . . ."

She nodded unhappily. After all, what did it matter now? The whole evening was spoilt. She wouldn't be with Steven any more, if she stayed with the party, than if she went back to town. But almost as if Lucilla guessed what

was in their minds, almost as if she had perversely made up her own mind that her arrangements, and hers only, were to be carried out, she waited for them at the entrance to the restaurant, singled out Karen, slipped an arm through the girl's. . . .

"You don't mind, do you, Miss Winter? But I want to consult Mr. Hallett about the alterations he is carrying out to that car I bought. Horrid of me to talk business at times like this, but I'm such a terribly busy person. . . . We'll get our talk over, and then I want you to have a good time. After all, there are plenty of men to go round!"

Karen wanted to protest, to apologise, to find an excuse - any excuse - for getting away, but the words wouldn't come. She was completely out-manceuvred. Before she knew where she was, she found herself in the back of Freddy Haxen's car, with Freddy Haxen driving at break-neck speed, while Barry sat in front beside him; Steven was taking Lucilla Sandle in his car, and Ian Foster, vastly amused, was "punished" by having to drive Lucilla's car back alone. He had clamoured for company, suggesting that Karen should drive with him instead, but Lucilla had deftly vetoed the proposition, and Karen was astonishingly glad that she had done so.

Lucilla's house turned out to be a vast, palatial place set in its own grounds, not far from Staines. Men servants scurried about at their mistress's entrance. Drinks appeared as if by magic. Haxen and Foster obviously knew it well, and Steven seemed to slip easily enough into his surroundings. Only Barry Gage and herself, Karen thought dismally, felt out of place. Presently, when Lucilla whisked Steven off on the pretext of talking business, Haxen and Foster disappeared, too, and she found herself alone with Barry in the great room, with its polished floor and luxurious modern furnishings.

Barry leaned back in his chair, and looked at her whimsically, his eyes very blue.

"This," he said, fishing out his cigarette-case and offering

it to her, "is a crashing bore. Too bad you had to be dragged into it. Or perhaps you enjoy seeing how the idle rich live?"

"I hate it!" The words came with a little, impetuous rush. He grinned.

"Then the best thing we can do is to pretend that we're somewhere else. This" - he waved his hand round - "is one of those pretentious hotels you find on the South Coast, and you and I are perfect strangers, meeting in the lounge for the first time. I say to you, 'Marvellous place, Seahaven!' and you reply with some equally imbecile remark. . . ."

"The air's so bracing!" Karen retorted, beginning to smile.

"Grand! And, thank heaven, there are very few trippers. . . ."

She hadn't expected this sort of fooling from Barry Gage. It was, she thought viciously, so terribly apt! Lucilla's mansion might so easily have been the very sort of hotel he had suggested. From a feeling of complete aloneness, she began to revive a little. They carried on the nonsensical conversation for twenty minutes or so. Then Barry frankly yawned.

"Why they bothered to drag us along at all, I can't understand! I could easily have borrowed Freddy's car and run you back. But that woman's a regular vampire. She won't face up to the fact that she's getting on in years. She makes me feel tired - literally - she's all noise and glitter."

Karen dropped her eyes. A little rush of contentment raced over her. It was comforting, somehow, when you had been made to feel so utterly unimportant, to realise that Lucilla Sandle didn't hypnotise everyone.

They drifted on to talk of other things. The imposing room worried Karen less now. She curled up in the big chair and chatted comfortably. And time drifted away. She began to think: He's forgotten all about me. And

her new-found comfort began to ebb. He'd been gone now for over an hour. An hour and a half. And she was beginning to feel very tired. Barry noticed the weariness in her face.

"Look here," he said, "I'm getting fed up. I'll find Haxen and borrow his car—he can easily get Hallett to drop him. Want to come?"

Karen hesitated. And then made up her mind. Probably it would be the best thing to do, she thought forlornly; Steven didn't want her any longer. Better get out of his way. Misjudging her hesitation, Barry smiled oddly.

"I'll behave myself, if that's what's worrying you."

At this, the first reference to the stormy scene in the flat, she coloured, and shook her head vigorously.

"I wasn't thinking about that. Just wondering—— But I think you're right. I'd be glad——"

"O.K.!" he nodded, and sprang to his feet. "Shan't be a moment!"

She sat waiting, amazed at her own bitter sense of disappointment. Fighting down the absolutely absurd sense of misery that threatened to engulf her. And then, just as Barry and Freddy Haxen appeared together at one of the French windows, Lucilla Sandle and Steven Hallett came back.

Lucilla was full of lavish apologies for her absence.

"They haven't left you all alone?"

Karen murmured explanations. Began to stammer apologies . . . it was getting late . . . Mr. Gage would run her back. . . . Mrs. Sandle would understand.

Lucilla shrugged slim shoulders. Protested politely, obviously caring not a jot. Karen was half afraid to look at Steven Hallett, lest he should look too—relieved—when she heard him expostulating sharply.

What was all this nonsense? Her heart leapt at his sharp announcement. Of course he was taking her back. . . .

She didn't know that the two men's eyes met over her head. Hallett's amused, challenging, Barry's steady,



enigmatical. She only knew that Steven had taken her firmly by the arm, that she had said her good-byes, that he was piloting her out to the car. . . .

Behind them, aware of Lucilla Sandle's amused, malicious eyes on his face, Barry grinned slightly - a grin without much mirth in it. Another round to Hallett.

## CHAPTER XV

FOR THE FIRST FEW MILES of the drive back to town, Steven Hallett said nothing. He had swung the car down the drive from Lucilla Sandle's house at an unexpected speed, and once on the main road, his foot had gone down on the accelerator, so that the miles seemed to flash past. It was dark, now, and the white ribbon of the curve seemed to flow past in the blackness. Only a few other cars were on the road; lights would show faintly on the windscreen, flash up - vanish into the dark behind. Twice Hallett swerved out to pass something travelling more slowly, but nothing overtook him. Karen lay back against the seat feeling oddly strung up. As if she could sense something in the man's mood.

Presently, abruptly, and as if for no special reason, she could feel the speed of the car slacken. Instead of hurling it through the night, he was letting it drift along gently at something like twenty miles an hour. He turned and looked down at her.

"So - you were walking out on me, were you?"

She said:

"I thought - perhaps - you'd be glad to get rid of me. I mean - you were busy with Mrs. Sandle."

He waited a moment, and a vague resentment at his unresponsiveness stirred her. After all, he had left her alone for ages. She had understood why he had to drag her into the Sandle party - wasn't that enough for him? She'd sat there, in that beastly, over-opulent room, with no one to talk to but Barry Gage, for ages and ages.

"And I was getting very tired. I didn't think you'd mind at all!"

"Hm. In other words, I was treating you very badly, and Gage came to your rescue. . . ."

She *was* tired, as she had said. It took a second or two for the meaning of the words, the meaning of his tone of suppressed resentment, to dawn upon her. And then her heart gave a sudden, startled leap. It couldn't be . . . it must be . . . sheer delight lit her eyes, and her mouth curved softly, enchantingly in the darkness.

Mr. Hallett - Steven - was jealous of Barry Gage!

She said, promptly:

"It wasn't that at all."

But the change in her voice, the hint of laughter, of happiness, of mischief in it, betrayed her to him. He knew enough about women, did Steven Hallett, to understand just what that tone meant. He laughed, too, aloud, and brought the car to a standstill. Sat, for a long second, looking down at her, while she waited . . . waited, her heart beginning to beat a frantic tattoo.

And then, as she had known he would do, he took her in his arms.

There wasn't anything involuntary about it this time. It was very deliberate, very masterful. Age-old instinct drove her to resist him ever so slightly; age-old response prompted him to something like roughness.

She found herself held, powerless, by an arm that seemed to have the strength of steel. Turned to look at him, and found his head very close to her own.

She had half expected him to kiss her then, but he didn't. He held her a moment longer, poignantly aware of his nearness, of his strength, before bending a little closer. Then he said, very softly, very unexpectedly passive:

"Kiss me, Kay!"

For a moment she hesitated, while he waited, a little smile softening his mouth. A queer, confused tumult stirred her heart.

She had never kissed any man of her own volition before. Barry Gage had kissed her once. Steven Hallett had kissed her twice. Other men who didn't matter, had kissed her once or twice, lightly, at dances. But never, in her whole life, had she offered her lips to any man. She was vaguely aware, as she moved her head in blind obedience to his command, that something had happened to her.

It was a long kiss. She had an absurd feeling of weakness when at last he raised his head and looked at her. He wasn't quite so calm, now. He said, laughing a little, and rather huskily :

"You're forgiven - but don't let it happen again, darling. . . ."

Darling. . . .

The foolish word that we toss so lightly to people who do not matter. That lovely word, on the lips of the person who does.

The lights of a car sprang up out of the darkness, and grew tremendous, bearing down on them. With a sudden absurd shyness - absurd, since the lights flowed by too quickly for the occupants of the other car to have seen anything - she turned, and hid her head against his shoulder. He chuckled a little at that, and held her more closely again. Her breath came quickly, and she could feel the blood singing through her veins.

He said :

"You funny thing. I believe you're shy, Kay! But it's better here than in the office, isn't it?"

She nodded quickly, and he added :

"Kiss me again, then, sweet. . . ."

She found her hands clasped at the back of his head, where the hair was short and crisp, and curiously thrilling to the touch. Found his cheek resting against hers, while he talked enchanting nonsense, and ever now and again dropped a kiss on her willing mouth. Until presently a large and solemn moon sailed out from behind a cloud to stare down on them, and flood the entire countryside with

light. And Steven looked down laughing into her dazzled eyes, and said, with mock solemnity :

"But - I forgot ! You're tired, and I promised to take you home !"

"I think - it's time you did," she told him, softly and yet half serious. But it was half an hour or more later before he let her go at last, reluctantly, and set his hands to steering wheel and gear lever. For the rest of the journey, instead of leaning back in her own corner, she was nestled against his side, her arm tucked through his, her hand lying beneath his on the wheel. Only when they were back in Chiswick, and the traffic became ever so slightly busier, did she withdraw it, in spite of his protest.

"I don't want to be slammed against the back of that tram," she told him, nodding at the monster rocking ahead of them. He scowled.

"If you don't think I can drive well enough with one hand . . ."

"I don't doubt," she teased, laughing a little from sheer happiness, "that you've had plenty of practice, but——"

He shot her a threatening glance.

"You'll pay for that presently, miss."

And Karen laughed again. She wouldn't mind, she thought, making that kind of payment.

It seemed only a few minutes before they were back outside the block of flats, mainly dark now, and quiet. Karen got out of the car reluctantly, and prepared to say good night. To her surprise he tucked a hand under her arm.

"Think I was going to let you go up those dark stairs by yourself ?"

She wanted to protest. She'd gone up those dark stairs alone, often enough. But somehow, the moment was so sweet that she could not bear to bring it to an end a second sooner than she had to.

The stairs were very dark, and she, who knew them, had to guide him, whispering and laughing a little in the darkness. Outside the door of the flat, she paused, fumbling in



her bag for her keys. Hallett took them gently out of her hand, and striking a match to find the keyhole, threw open the door.

"And now, I suppose," he said, "I must really say good night."

There was an odd, reluctant note in his voice. Karen thought swiftly, hesitated, and then . . .

"Unless you'd like to come in for a moment," she said. "There may be some beer in the house, but I can't even offer you a drink till I've made sure there is some left."

She had a fleeting, resentful memory of Lucilla Sandle's place. But now, somehow, she didn't mind Steven seeing the little flat. Was glad when he accepted eagerly, and followed her into the hall. She led him into the sitting-room, and switched on the light.

"I'll see——" she said, but before she could investigate the contents of the sideboard, he had her in his arms again.

"Come here."

There was a new note in his voice. A heavy, urgent note which should have frightened her but didn't. She went to him willingly enough, held up her face confidently enough, when suddenly a sleepy voice through a half-open door enquired:

"That you, Kay?"

Whirling round abruptly, he let her go.

"Who's that?" he asked, an odd note in his voice. Karen laughed, a little excitedly.

"Only the girl I share this place with," she said in a whisper. "Just a second."

Soft-footed, she stole into Molly's room.

"It's me, Molly. And Mr. Hallett. I brought him up to see if Jim had left any of the beer."

Molly nodded sleepily against the pillow.

"You'll find two bottles in the sideboard. Had a good time?"

"Lovely!" Karen told her, her voice lilting. "Tell you all about it to-morrow. Night night!"

She went back to the sitting-room, automatically closing the door behind her, but somehow, for some reason she could not understand, the magic seemed to have vanished. Hallett made no attempt to take her in his arms again. Seemed anxious to hurry over his drink, suddenly aware that it was very late. They talked a little longer, but she was aware of a dull sense of anti-climax, and was almost relieved when he rose to go. At the door he slipped his arm round her again and kissed her, but it was somehow different. And when the door had closed behind him, she realised suddenly that she was very tired.

Yawning, she got into bed as fast as possible. And once there, once comfortably drowsy and going dreamily over the events of the evening again in her mind, the sense of anti-climax faded and complete happiness enveloped her again.

He did care . . . enough to be jealous of Barry Gage . . . Barry Gage !

She went to sleep at last smiling over the ridiculousness of that jealousy, with the memory of his arms about her, and a voice echoing in her ears. . . .

A voice which said, "Darling !"

## CHAPTER XVI

ON MONDAY MORNING, Karen, whose turn it was to be up first, slid out of bed with an alert sense of expectancy.

Sunday had been a long day. A sort of dull gap in the rushing tide which seemed to have taken hold of her. A series of tedious hours which had to elapse before she plunged again into the tide.

Jim and Molly had gone in the afternoon to look at houses. They had asked her to go too, but she had refused, offering tiredness as an excuse. Molly had accepted it readily enough.

"You were late enough last night!" she commented. "I was beginning to get worried about you."

Karen laughed. They were washing up the lunch dishes together.

"I was all right."

"You seem to be having a hectic time, these days," Molly commented mildly. "First you go out to Elstree. Then you make whoopee with your boss, and go calling on society . . . not to mention having that nice Mr. Gage to buy you dinners in between."

"He was there last night," Karen said, almost idly. "At least, he was at Barnaby's with Mr. Haxen, and Mrs. Sandle asked them back to her place too."

Molly said:

"Well! Ian Foster - Lucilla Sandle - and then, as if that weren't enough, you add Freddy Haxen! When's *your* picture going to appear in the *Tatler*?"

Inwardly, she was a little disturbed. Not altogether happy about Karen. It seemed such a short time since

she had gone to Bamfield's, and all these things were happening to her. And then, remembering Barry Gage, she cheered up a little. If all these people were as nice as he was, she thought, Karen was lucky, and that was all there was to it.

And, after all, she and Jim were going to look for their home together this afternoon. . . . Molly's mind was too full at the moment for her to indulge freely in vague worries and misgivings.

Karen had stayed at home. Darning, mending, pressing. Discontentedly turning over the contents of her wardrobe, and wishing desperately that she could burn its entire contents. The little beige suit afforded a ray of consolation, but it was depressing to think that it would be ages before she could afford to buy anything more. And all the while, as she worked away, Steven Hallett's face kept rising before her. She kept seeing his dark eyes, hearing his voice . . . feeling his lips. . . .

And so, when Monday came, she was glad to greet it.

Setting the kettle on to boil, she went to the door to take in the milk, and found a couple of letters in the box. One was for Molly, and one for her. Typewritten envelope, looking rather dull. Absent-mindedly, she stuffed it into the pocket of her pyjamas, and went back to the kitchen to make tea. It wasn't till she had taken a cup in to Molly, still in bed, and handed over her share of the mail, that she remembered it again.

"I expect it's from that agency," she said, ripping the envelope carelessly open, "that place I registered with before I got this job. They've taken their time, and I don't want them now, anyhow."

It wasn't like employment agency paper, though the letter was typewritten. It was stiff, dignified, with an address neatly set at the top, and the type was blurred slightly, suggesting an old-fashioned copying press. Curiously, she began to read . . . stared incredulously . . . reached out a hand to catch hold of Molly's arm.

"Listen to this," she exclaimed breathlessly. "Somebody's left me a thousand pounds!"

Molly paused, her cup of tea half-way to her lips.

"What?"

"So these people say. Helena Marriott - she was a funny old cousin of Daddy's. He was awfully decent to her - I was only a kid at the time, but I remember quite well hearing him talk about Helena. As mad as a hatter, he used to say, and he was sorry for her. And now - she's left me a thousand pounds!"

Molly reached for the letter. Read it through, while Karen watched her. Handed it back.

"Well, Kay!" she breathed, "Isn't that marvellous!"

Karen was beginning to realise that it was true. When you've never owned more than ten pounds in your life at a time, and that looked like a tremendous lot of money, there is something breath-taking in suddenly finding yourself entitled to a sum of money that runs into four figures. It has an incredible, fairy-tale quality about it. A thrill and glamour which super-tax payers will never know. Kay stared at Molly, round-eyed.

"A thousand pounds!" she breathed. And though Molly couldn't know it, her mind had travelled in one glorious flash to a shop in Bond Street.

Molly, the level-headed, commented:

"It's lovely, Kay! Even if you invest it very carefully, you'll have about thirty pounds a year——"

Jim had taken out an endowment insurance policy, which was to mature when he and Molly were fifty-five and fifty respectively, and they had often discussed what they were going to do with the money. So Molly knew just what "a really safe investment" might be expected to produce. Karen threw up her head.

"I don't want to invest it carefully!" she announced recklessly; Molly frowned.

"You don't mean that you'll spend it?"

"Not all." Even Karen's recklessness didn't go so far.



"But some. Oh, Molly, you don't know how much I want some clothes. . . ."

Karen, who had never bothered much about clothes! The vague sense of disquiet stirred again in Molly. Karen *was* changing. All these people she had been meeting were doing that for her. And Molly, whose own idea of happiness was so firmly rooted in security and peace, knew a pang of anxiety. Karen didn't think that she was going to keep up with people like Lucilla Sandle. . . . But because she was wise, and because she was fond of Karen, Molly didn't argue.

"Well, it's your money, and I'm sure you won't do anything silly with it, Kay. Anyway, it'll probably be ages before you get it."

Karen looked up radiant.

"No! You didn't read the letter properly, Moll. They say that as soon as they are satisfied as to my identity, and so on, they can pay over the legacy. They want my birth certificate or something . . . and then I can have it. Oh, Molly!"

Molly's glance fell on the clock. With a little exclamation, she pushed the bedclothes on one side, and sprang up.

"That legacy of yours is all very well, my dear - but we'll both get the sack if we don't hurry up - look at the time!"

. . . . .

Karen's heart was singing as she hurried along to the office, a tune that kept time with her hurrying feet. The sun was shining, the Park was bright with flowers, the streets were crowded with busy people . . . and she, Karen, had just come into a thousand pounds. . . .

And she would be seeing Steven Hallett again in less than an hour's time!

She was humming cheerfully as she ripped open his morning's mail and set it ready for him on his desk. Barry Gage glanced at her curiously as he came into the room.

"You're very cheerful this morning, Miss Winter. I

gather Hallett got you home all right the other night?"

She nodded.

"Of course he did!" And then, afraid that he might read too much in her dancing eyes, her smiling mouth, she added hastily, "I'm feeling frightfully cheerful! I heard this morning that someone has left me a thousand pounds!"

A little of the tension in Barry's expression faded. So that was it. It wasn't Steven Hallett who was responsible for that light in her eyes. He smiled, with genuine pleasure.

"Good for you! You needed a consolation prize after that boring evening on Saturday."

She made a face.

"I suppose Mrs. Sandle thought she was being very kind, asking me along at all."

Barry scowled.

"She couldn't very well have asked Hallett without you. I thought it was darned cheek of her, anyhow, raking other people into her party just because she was bored with that young ass Foster. Trouble with women of that sort is that they expect to have everything their own way."

"I gather," Kay said, twinkling, "that you don't like Mrs. Sandle!"

"I do not. I like a woman to be a woman, and not a man-eater."

"I'm afraid," her voice was demure, "that you find women on the whole very trying!"

He looked down at her severely, and then his pleasantly ugly face crinkled into a grin.

"Meaning that it's my own fault? Perhaps you're right, but I can't help it, can I? And, for my sins, I've got to go out this morning and sell a car to a bit of fluff from musical comedy. I came in to see if that estimate I asked for was in the mail. . . ."

Karen found it for him. Handed it to him, and saw him go, wishing him luck with the sale.

And hardly realised at the time that somehow she and Barry Gage had slipped back to their old, friendly footing.

That things between them were, at least as far as she was concerned, as if that – horrid – episode at the flat had never happened. She hadn't enough thoughts to spare for Barry Gage to wonder that he could so quickly have blurred it over in her mind. Or to wonder if he had changed. Taken her answer for final and accepted it.

Her mind was too full of Steven Hallett.

She was in her own room when he walked into his office, but the familiar sound of his footsteps set her heart beating, and she was tense and strung up when she finally answered the call of his buzzer.

He was sitting behind his desk, alert, preoccupied, running through the letters. Gave her an absent smile, and tossed her a pile to answer. Then, swinging round in his chair, he said briskly :

"I want to get out some figures, Miss Winter. Mr. Bamfield is due back in the office to-morrow, and I want to have some schedules ready for him."

As if it were the first time she had heard it, Karen nodded in silence. Listened intently, as he outlined his requirements. Fetched files and ledgers, and made copious notes, concentrating keenly. He nodded at last, satisfied.

"I've got to go out, now. But if you'll get out a rough draft and have it ready for me by lunch time . . . I may be late, if you don't mind waiting? . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Hallett."

"Thank you." He flicked his case open, took a cigarette and lit it. "That's all for the moment."

Back in her own room, fighting down a vague disappointment, Karen told herself valiantly.

"Of course, he's right. Business is business – and this is terribly important. Saturday night was – something different——"

Convinced herself finally that she really meant it. Polished off her letters quickly, and sat down, fiercely intent, to prepare a rough draft which should be everything it was required to be.

But when she took it in to him later, she couldn't help thinking, as she sat silent watching him run through the figures, of the way he had kissed her, of the note that had been in his voice when he called her darling . . . couldn't help thinking of Cousin Helena's marvellous thousand pounds, and the clothes she would buy. Couldn't help wondering when - when - when - it would happen again.

## CHAPTER XVII

TIME WENT BY, and Karen gradually ceased to wonder when Steven Hallett would kiss her again. Wondered, instead, if he would ever do it. For with Mr. Bamfield's return, things seemed to be changed.

Hallett seemed to be caught up in a whirl of business. Frequent conferences with the managing director cut into his time at the office, and Karen found herself taking more and more responsibility on her own shoulders. Working harder and harder to achieve the results that Steven Hallett wanted. Saving him time and trouble wherever she could, and finding her reward in his grateful acceptance of her help, his occasional appreciative comments. Trying to content herself with the knowledge that her job was shaping into the perfect job she had always coveted. Trying to stifle the new knowledge that nowadays she seemed to want something more out of life as well.

She might have felt things more keenly, if her scanty spare time had not been fully occupied in helping Molly with the preparations for her wedding. Since her only relation was an elderly bachelor uncle, and since Jim's people lived in the Midlands, Molly and Jim made their own arrangements. A church wedding - neither of them liked the idea of a registry office - followed by a small party - "I'm not going to call it anything so grand as a reception!" Molly protested - at an hotel. And because she and Jim were starting off on their honeymoon immediately after the party, Molly elected to be married in her going-away clothes. Karen said, with an unusual rush of sentiment :



"What a pity, Moll! You'd have made a lovely bride in white satin!"

"I daresay," Molly had agreed sedately, "but what would I do with a white satin dress afterwards? Jim and I won't be doing much gallivanting, even if I had it altered. I'd much rather spend the money on a really pretty suit I can wear on the honeymoon."

As the day drew nearer and nearer, Karen began to realise with greater acuteness than ever before just what a gap Molly's going would make in her life. She had fallen in, without argument, with Molly's plan for her to take Louise to share the flat, and Louise had accepted the proposition eagerly. Was going to move in the day after Molly's departure. "I suppose we'll get on all right together," Karen thought, "but - it'll all be so different. . . ."

She was listless and indifferent about things like that these days. For a brief space, life had caught her and rushed her along in its torrent. Now, just as suddenly, it seemed to have abandoned her. She was aware of a bitter sense of resentment as she knelt in church, listening to the words which made Molly and Jim man and wife.

Molly was radiant. Even Jim seemed to have escaped his fair share of bridegroom's nervousness. It was the best man - a pal from his office - who fumbled things, and dropped the ring. And the small scattering of friends and relations who gathered together in the hotel to drink their health, and make speeches and propose toasts, seemed to be mere, colourless onlookers. Even Jim's father and mother - pleasant, kindly people, obviously delighted with their son's choice of a wife - were little more than a background for Molly and Jim and their patent happiness.

"And - what's it all about?" Kay wondered. "She's going to settle down, after a fortnight's honeymoon, in that little house. See him off in the morning, and cook his dinner for him at night. Weed the garden, and have the neighbours in to tea. . . . And Jim's a dear, but he's not in the least exciting . . . *why do I envy her so?*"

She set her champagne glass down with a listless hand, and looked up — to stare, surprised, straight into the eyes of Barry Gage.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she asked, before she had time to consider the apparent ungraciousness of the words. He laughed.

"I ran into Molly in the street the other day, and she invited me to come along. I couldn't get to the church——"

He looked round, and when he turned back to Karen, his eyes were astonishingly sober.

"He's a good fellow. I hope they'll be happy."

"And she's a darling."

"I'm sure she is." His voice was sincere. "He's a lucky man." He studied her intently for a moment.

"You're looking tired!" he accused. "I've noticed it for some time. You're overdoing things again, Miss Winter!"

"I suppose I am——" she rushed on, to cut short the reproaches she felt were in the air (it was none of his business if she worked hard, anyway, but she didn't want to quarrel with him to-day). "Life's been a bit of a rush — I haven't been able to do much to help Molly, but there were odds and ends. And then, of course, she's leaving me, and I had to arrange about someone else sharing the flat——" Her eyes fell on Louise and she beckoned her over. "This is my new partner——"

The tall blonde girl was looking very lovely, very smart. She and Barry seemed to take to one another immediately, and Karen was angry and astonished to realise that she was experiencing a small pang of jealousy. Of all the cats in the manger! She didn't want Barry herself — she simply couldn't be small-minded enough to object to his taking an interest in another woman! Yet she found herself looking after them, as they drifted away, with a sudden acute sense of loneliness. . . .

If only Mr. Hallett would give way to Steven again . . . only once. . . .

She had been too proud, too diffident, to say a single word to recall that Saturday night. It hurt, of course, that he could behave so completely as if nothing had ever happened between them . . . so that at times she almost wondered if he had kissed her and held her in his arms, or if it had merely been part of a lovely dream. During the past few weeks he had been so unfailingly the Mr. Hallett of her earlier days at the office. Friendlier, of course, calling on her for more, relying on her more—but simply the Mr. Hallett whose secretary she was. Never the Steven against whose shoulder she had hid her face, who had teased her for being shy.

She had tried to sink her unhappiness in her work. Fiercely, proudly resolved that what had happened between them should not affect their business relationship, but it hadn't been easy to subdue the emotional turmoil that stirred in her inevitably from time to time. She had lain awake many nights into the small hours, trying to find ease for her aching heart. And that, far more than the amount of work that had been heaped on her shoulders, far more than any rush she had had in helping Molly, was responsible for the pale drawn look which Barry Gage had noticed, if Steven Hallett hadn't.

And now Molly was going. . . .

She had never realised to the full until that moment, just what it was going to mean to her to lose Molly.

She had never confided in Molly all that had happened since she went to Bamfields, but there had always been the knowledge that Molly was there to confide in, if need drove her to it. Molly, who would understand and sympathise. Molly who possessed that rare feminine faculty of knowing when criticism can only fail, and things are best listened to and left alone.

Karen wished suddenly, bitterly, that she had never agreed to take Louise into the place that Molly was leaving.

She needn't have done it. If she had been very sensible, and decided to invest Cousin Helena's money, the interest

would have taken care of Molly's share of the rent. And Mr. Hallett had promised her a rise in salary. She could have been careful, and carried on, indulging in the luxury of being alone.

She had thought that, once she got used to the change, she would rather like to have Louise with her. That it would be less lonely. Now, staring across the room to the corner where Louise and Barry Gage were still talking and laughing together, she knew that she didn't want Louise. Didn't want anyone, but less than anyone else the tall, blonde girl.

And then scolded herself for giving way to a mood. She liked Louise. They thought the same way about so many things. And Louise was really a good sort. They'd get on splendidly, really, once they had shaken down.

Karen realised suddenly that Molly was trying to catch her eye. Went over obediently. Molly laid an urgent hand on her arm.

"It's nearly time we were going, Kay. But I had to say good-bye specially to you. Remember - you're going to come and see us just the minute we get home. . . ."

"Of course I am!" Kay promised.

"And one of these days," Molly said, her eyes misty with happiness, "I'm going to come to your wedding - and you're going to be as happy——"

Karen laughed. Fenced.

"Now, then, Molly, wait a bit! Every girl who gets married tries to marry off her spinster friends!"

"Because they know it's the best thing! You don't want to go on living alone in that flat, slogging away at your job. . . ."

"What a moment to argue about it!" Karen laughed. "We'll talk it all over when you get back. Jim's looking anxious. Good-bye, Molly, and - good luck!"

A hug and a kiss from Molly. A quick kiss from Jim. A chorus of good-byes - good-lucks . . . and then bride and

groom had vanished, and a sort of flatness seemed to descend on the party.

Jim's mother came over and talked to Karen, tears of tremulous happiness in her eyes. Gradually the small crowd thinned. Karen realised suddenly that Barry Gage hadn't gone yet. He came over and stood beside her.

"And now, what are you doing?"

"Going home, I suppose," she told him flatly. He eyed her keenly.

"Your new companion going with you?"

"No. She's coming to-morrow."

He said, surprising her with his understanding:

"So you're going home alone. To clear things up? All by yourself?"

"All by myself!" she nodded. He eyed her a moment, keenly. And then:

"Not going at once, are you? Wait a minute - I want to see you again——"

He vanished, and Louise was there, serene, cool, still lovely.

"Well - Molly's a married woman, now, Kay. And you and I are still on the shelf! Is everything O.K. for to-morrow? I thought I could bring my things over in the evening. . . ."

"O.K." Karen nodded, steadily. After all, it was decent of Louise to come and share the flat. They'd get on all right. She was saying candidly:

"I expect you'll hate me after Molly. But we'll get used to one another."

"Don't be absurd! Of course we will. . . ."

Words. All words. That didn't mean much.

"I like your Mr. Gage. . . ."

A cheerful voice broke in on the confidence.

"Glad to hear that, Miss Madden!"

Louise turned, laughing, reproachful, but he simply threw her a cheerful grin, and caught Karen by the arm.



"I want you - or rather, you're wanted on the telephone! Come along——"

He hurried her half way down the hotel stairs before she had time to protest.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see! Here you are——"

The telephone booth was open, the receiver off the hook. Bewildered but obedient, she picked it up, wondering confusedly if it was a call from the office. But an unfamiliar feminine voice answered her hallo. A rather sweet, very friendly voice.

"Is that Miss Winter? This is Mrs. Gage speaking. My absurd son tells me that he wants to bring you back to tea, but he's sure you won't come unless I ask you. . . ."

Startled, Karen stammered:

"But that's awfully kind of you. . . ."

"My dear, I shall be delighted if you'll come. I've so often wanted to meet you - heard so much about you - Barry will show you the way - it isn't far——"

Karen's eyes sought Barry, through the glass of the telephone booth. He grinned at her, a slightly embarrassed grin. She pulled herself together, managed to reply coherently.

"It's terribly kind of you, Mrs. Gage——"

"Then you will come? That's splendid."

Karen emerged from the booth, and raised questioning eyes to Barry Gage's face.

"Why——?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable.

"I thought you'd much better have a rest and some tea before you go back to that flat of yours," he said. "It's not good for little girls to brood - I thought it would be better to take you in hand."

"That was kind of you," she said, touched. He'd shown imagination as well as kindness, in realising what it would be like for her to go back to that empty flat. "But why——"

She paused, uncertain about the question on her lips, but he seemed to have read her thoughts.

"Why did I make you talk to mother? Well - I didn't know——" he grinned again, rather mischievously: "I thought you might refuse to come with me, even if I promised that there wouldn't be any - rough stuff!"

She coloured a little, and laughed with him.

"Anyhow, it's all right, isn't it? Good. The flat's quite near - we can walk it, unless you'd rather taxi. So come along!"

And tucking his hand through her arm in a friendly way, he shepherded her out of the hotel.

## CHAPTER XVIII

SHE ENJOYED THAT AFTERNOON which she spent with Barry Gage and his mother even more than she realised at the time.

Mrs. Gage was a smaller, slighter edition of her son, with his masculine plainness translated into something that was very nearly feminine ugliness, but such a charming ugliness that you were hardly aware of it. For her eyes, which were still as blue as Barry's, held such kindness, such understanding, such humour that they caught and held your whole attention. And Karen, whose own mother had died when she was too young to retain more than the most shadowy memory of her, watched with something like envy the obvious *camaraderie* that existed between the two of them.

It was a peaceful household, too. The flat was simply furnished, mainly in mahogany, and the colour scheme of blue and grey, with an occasional note of gold, was restful. A trim and very silent-footed maid who obviously thought a great deal both of her mistress and her master, waited on them. And Mrs. Gage was kindly and attentive to her unexpected guest. Only once or twice Karen imagined she caught the older woman's eyes on her with question and speculation in their depths.

She was cheered and rested and definitely very grateful when she rose to go.

"It was - awfully kind of Barry to do this!" she said frankly, smiling into the older woman's eyes. "He must have guessed how horrid it was going to be for

me to go back to the flat alone. It won't be half so bad now."

Mrs. Gage smiled in answer.

"He's quite an understanding creature, for a mere man. But he knew quite well that I'd like to meet you, and probably he thought this was as good a time as any. I'm very glad he brought you along, my dear. I hope you'll come and see me again."

"I shall be very glad to," Karen told her sincerely. And meant it. She'd begun to realise recently how few friends she had. She hadn't bothered much to cultivate friendships - Molly and she seemed to be enough for one another - and now that Molly was gone, she would have to rely more on her own resources. Louise, of course, would be there, but she couldn't believe that Louise could ever round life out as completely as Molly had done. Besides, Louise had probably interests of her own, which she wouldn't expect Karen to share. It would be nice to feel that she could come round and see Mrs. Gage occasionally.

As if she had read her thought, the older woman said :

"I hope you won't think it necessary to wait for a formal invitation, or anything stupid of that sort. Ring up to say you're coming - or take a chance, if you don't mind the very slender risk of my being out. I don't gad about much, but Barry takes me to a show occasionally."

"I will," Karen promised, and turned to say good-bye to Barry, but he announced his intention of taking her home.

"I'll deliver you to your doorstep," he told her, smiling a little, so that she flushed slightly, and her eyes dropped. And he was as good as his word. She climbed the stairs meditating absently on the difference between Barry as he usually was - Barry as he had been to-day - and Barry as he had been on that one - she was beginning to substitute the word absurd for horrid - occasion.

. . . . .

It was strange to wake the next morning alone in the flat ; to eat a solitary breakfast, and solemnly wash up one cup, one knife and fork. To have no one to chatter with as she did a little sketchy housework and got ready to set out for the office. Now, with yesterday's nervous tension abated, she was glad to think that Louise was moving in that evening. And in the meantime, of course, there were the office, and the day's work ahead of her to keep her from brooding and falling back into a foolish state of mind. But she didn't dream just what an exciting day lay ahead of her.

Steven Hallett was late in turning up at the office. And when he rang for her, she could see that he was in an unusually dark mood. He had little but monosyllables to spare during the first half hour, and he worked like a demon, as if he wanted for some reason to get his desk cleared for action. But not until he had dictated replies to all the letters, worked off all telephone calls, and taken all the salesmen's reports on the previous day, did he give her the slightest inkling of what lay behind this mood of his.

Karen was rising to go, but he stopped her.

"Wait a minute. I've got something to tell you."

Obediently she sat down again, her heart beginning to thump a little with anticipation. He played for a moment or two with the pencils which lay on his desk, and then turned to face her.

"I had a talk with old Bamfield last night. He's had time to digest those figures I left with him. And he had to acknowledge that they were a great deal better than anything he had hoped for. Once I'd got him to admit that, I had a shot at my own business. Told him that what I really wanted was an interest. . . ."

It was the first time he had referred to the plans he had confided to her on that eventful evening. She leant forward and waited eagerly for what was to follow.



"Yes?" she said, almost breathless with excitement. Hallett's mouth took a wry twist.

"He seemed to find the idea rather humorous!" he said drily.

Karen sat back as if a bucket of cold water had been flung over her. It was some moments before she could find her voice, and when she did it was quivering with indignation.

"Humorous!"

Hallett seemed to derive a little comfort from her tone. He nodded. Spoke less tensely.

"Oh, quite praiseworthy ambition in a young man, don't you know, but of course, my boy, you don't mean me to take this seriously - that sort of thing."

Karen said furiously:

"Of all the cheek!"

She hadn't seen much of Mr. Bamfield since his return from America, and what she had seen hadn't impressed her much. A short, fattish, unimposing person, he didn't seem to her to justify the importance of his position. And - although she was hardly conscious of it herself - his attitude towards her had chilled and snubbed her. He had taken far more notice of the fair, unambitious Miss Rowson than he had of his new Sales Manager's new secretary.

Not that she'd really expected anything. But when he paid a special visit to the telephone room to greet Miss Rowson on his return, and had asked, with the most human interest, after her *fiancé* and the progress of her affairs generally, it wasn't encouraging when his eyes more or less slid over herself, as if he had hardly seen her, and was quite certain she didn't matter anyhow.

That was bad enough, but if he tried to treat Steven like this. . . .

Hallett was speaking again.

"I assured him that I did mean it, and he didn't like that a bit. He hummed and hawed, and bledhered about the

policy of the company, and its duty to its old servants. Pointed out that I'd hardly been with the firm a year. So I suggested very politely that, in view of that fact, he might consider what I had already done for the company, and what I might be expected to do in future, if they treated me properly."

Karen's eyes glowed.

"And then?"

"And then——" the hint of bitterness was creeping back into his voice. "I suppose he saw that I really was serious, and that he'd have to do something. So he offered me an increase in salary, and told me to put my other ideas right out of my head."

A small feeling of disappointment took hold of Karen. Subconsciously, she had been building great hopes on Steven. He was to go ahead — she was to go with him. But if old Bamfield so resolutely blocked his path. . . .

She said :

"It's a shame. It isn't as if you didn't deserve it ; after all the money you've made for the company, even in the past few months, since I came here."

Her mind flew to the schedules they had got out together.

"Why," she added, "you actually sold half the cars yourself——"

"I did !" he agreed. "I've added twenty or thirty new clients to the books, as well as selling to old customers. And all I get is a very reluctant thank you — and a miserable increase in salary——"

He waited a moment. And then, lowering his voice so that he spoke very quietly indeed, he said :

"It's not good enough, Miss Winter. I'm not going to put up with it. What d'you say if the pair of us go off and start on our own?"

Karen's heart began to thump again, a maddening tune.

"You mean——?" she breathed.

"I mean," he said, slowly and very deliberately, "that I'm not going to take old Bamfield's increase in salary and

be a good boy. I told him I wanted an interest in the business — and if he won't give it to me, I'm going to have an interest in a business of my own. If you'd like to come with me, I'll take you — you know I'll give you a break, and I don't suppose you'd get much further here if you stayed on after I went."

"Oh!" she gasped, breathless with excitement, her mind conjuring up vivid pictures of the enthralling future. Steven running his own business, with her at his side. The pair of them tackling life together, and triumphantly overcoming it. And perhaps one day . . .

Almost as if he had read what was running through her mind, Steven leant forward and smiled very directly into her eyes.

"I think we'd make a go of things together, don't you, Kay?"

It was the first time he had used her "little name" since that Saturday evening. She nodded, cheeks flushed, eyes brilliant.

With a swift return to business, he said:

"I'd pay you what you're getting here — to begin with. And then, just as soon as business justified it, I'd give you more. You'll come?"

"Of course!"

"That's fine. Mind you, it's all between the two of us for the time being! Old Bamfield can think that he's settled my hash — that I'm quite content, and have given up my big ideas. I'm not fool enough to start on a thing like this without making very thorough preparations——"

She thought again . . . how wonderful he was. And how wonderful it was to think that they two, and they two alone, shared the secret. That he could trust her so. . . .

"You've got copies of those schedules? That list of new customers? We'll want those. And lots more things I shall think of from time to time. And, Kay——" he hesitated for a moment, and then went on, his face alight with anticipated triumph:

"I shouldn't be surprised if I took the Sarazen agency away from old Bamfield when I go! He's been a bit high-handed, there - a bit too hot in discussing the terms of next year's contract, because we've done so well for them this year. I've taken care that the Sarazen people know just who has been responsible for those increased sales - and I think if I set about it cleverly enough, they may tell Mr. Bamfield just where he gets off, and let me have the London distribution of the car. . . ."

Karen gasped. She hadn't been in Steven Hallett's confidence all this time, hadn't got out those very secret figures and details, without learning just how much money that particular agency put into the Bamfield bank account. If Steven could get it instead . . .

Steven laughed at her rapt expression.

"Before I'm done with them, they'll wish they'd given me that interest!" he prophesied grimly. "Mind you" - and his face grew serious again - "it's not likely to be easy going. We'll both have to work harder than ever - for a time. But it'll be worth it!"

"It'll be worth it!" Karen echoed enthusiastically.

He watched her for a moment. Then he said very softly:

"D'you know - you were the deciding factor in my taking this step! I don't think I should have done it without you. I'll need someone like you - someone with brains and energy - someone I can really trust——"

Karen was horrified to find that tears were gathering in her eyes. That a hard lump of emotion choked her throat, so that she couldn't speak. She looked at him, her lips trembling and he leant forward and laid a hand gently over hers - held it very closely.

"I've promised myself," he said very low, "that there's going to be no more foolishness in the office, Kay. But one of these days - shall we go out together and have some food somewhere, and talk about business - and other things?"

Her whole heart was in her eyes as she nodded. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and his clasp on her hand grew tighter.

"Soon!" he said - and the word was a promise as much as an enquiry.

And "Soon!" echoed Karen's madly thumping heart.



## CHAPTER XIX

CAUGHT AS SHE WAS in the grip of an emotion wholly new to her, Karen never stopped to think clearly about the future. It isn't easy to think clearly when you are in love for the first time – and love is something you have never previously taken into your reckoning.

She had planned clearly enough the sort of job she wanted, never quite believing that it was ever likely to materialise. But her thinking about the future had always been done in terms of working and forging ahead. She had never visualised, as Molly had, even before Jim came along, a life for herself which should include a home and a husband. If she had, there would have been a place in the picture into which Steven Hallett would automatically have been fitted in her mind. Lacking that, she was slow in building the picture around him.

She knew vaguely that she wanted always to be with him. That he could raise her to the seventh heaven with a kiss, and that the mere touch of his hand set her heart to pumping madly. She hadn't yet translated that emotion to the more mundane terms of married life. For if marriage is a sacrament, married life to most women has simply a strong suggestion of domesticity.

And so, for the time being, she was content to love him. To hope madly that he loved her. To feel crazily happy when he suggested taking her out. To work for him, scheme for him, do everything in her power to please and help him. And, to lock the whole secret in her own breast, confiding in no one.

If things had been different with Molly, Karen might have told her in time. But Molly had been preoccupied with her own concerns; and even now, when she had returned, there would always be the feeling that a secret shared with Molly was a secret shared with Jim. Something quite different. Louise, Karen neither knew well enough, nor cared enough for, to take her so fully into her confidence.

She liked her well enough, now that she had arrived at the flat and they had settled down together. Louise had something of Karen's own independence about her, which made her in many ways an ideal flat-mate. Her share of the weekly expenses was met as promptly as she took her part of the work to be done. And if she was a little harder, a lot more cynical than Molly had been, Karen simply told herself that Molly was Molly, and there weren't many like her.

Louise was still taking her evening classes three nights a week. The other evenings she and Karen went to the pictures together, occasionally to a pit, or else stayed in and talked and did odd jobs. Very occasionally in a fit of boredom Louise let Philip—about whom Molly had teased her—take her out. Once or twice she brought him to the flat, and Karen, liking him, could yet understand why Louise was impatient of him. There was a strain of weakness in him which might have appealed to a girl of a different type, which only made Louise impatient.

So far, Steven Hallett had not taken Karen out again. He was frantically busy, putting his plans into the most discreet execution, and each day at the office provided Karen with new excitement of some kind. She herself was working as hard as she possibly could for him, preparing elaborate files of all sorts of information. The legacy from her cousin had duly arrived, but she had been too busy to do anything but open a bank account with it, and put it on deposit, against the day when she should be able to do some shopping with it, and consider the investment of the

rest. Molly had returned from her brief honeymoon, and she and Jim had taken possession of their new home. Visiting her there, Karen felt more acutely than ever that a gap between them was slowly, subtly widening.

As the weeks drifted by, Karen's sense of excitement grew. Hallett had secretly taken a small showroom in a new building, and it was being decorated to his instructions. He had privately secured the contract for Sarazen cars. And he was planning to leave Bamfields a week or two before the motor show - when he hoped to secure for his new business a considerable number of sales which would otherwise have gone to Bamfields.

"It'll serve them right!" Karen thought, with hot partisanship. "If they had treated him decently. . . ."

"The Old Man can give Gage his precious job, and see what happens to the sales figures!" Steven Hallett said exultantly one morning. "I've pushed them up - they'll go down with a bang when I go!"

Illogically, Karen was aware of a small sense of regret. Barry had been so decent lately. She didn't like the thought of his showing up badly against Hallett - as of course he must. Out of loyalty to Steven, she stifled the feeling, and smiled radiantly.

"I reckon," Hallett said, "that our showroom will be ready in three weeks' time. Just as soon as I'm sure, I'll let the Old Man know I'm going. Of course, I'm under contract - but I don't suppose he'll want to keep me to it. If he does, I'll darned well break it, and he can sue me. I'm not going to work for him a minute longer than it suits my own convenience."

"He won't like letting you go, of course," Karen murmured, looking up from her notebook. "Suppose - suppose when he knows he changes his mind, and offers you what you wanted?"

"I don't——" Hallett began, when the abrupt opening of his door interrupted the words. He looked up angrily to see who was bursting in without knocking, but his

expression changed when Mr. Bamfield walked into the room. He sprang to his feet.

"Good morning, sir——"

"You can save your breath to cool your porridge, young man!" the managing director said curtly. "Don't try any more of your smarmy tricks on me!"

Before Karen could gasp, he had slammed a piece of paper down on Hallett's desk.

"Of all the yellow, underhand pups!" the older man went on, a surprisingly vigorous rasp in his usually sleepy voice. "But you've overreached yourself properly, my lad! Did you really think you could get away with this sort of thing?"

Karen stole a swift glance at the piece of paper. Recognised a letter which Hallett had sent to a customer, confident that it would be treated as strictly confidential.

"Staunton's been a customer of Bamfields since he left Eton," the rasping voice went on, "and you've got the impertinence to try and collar his business for *Hallett Car Sales Limited*. . . ."

The scorn he put into the name of the new firm made Karen flush with anger. Hallett remained calm, though he had gone a little white.

"I'm sorry——"

"And you'll be a lot sorrier before I've done with you! I gave you a chance that most men would have leapt at—gave you a rise only a few weeks ago—and all the time you've been scheming to steal business from this firm——"

"I've done nothing of the kind!" Hallett retorted hotly. "I didn't want to leave the firm—you forced me to do it when——"

"When I wouldn't listen to your grandiloquent plans, I suppose you mean! You've got too damned big for your boots, young man! You'll find them pinch you yet. In the meantime—get out!"

They stood facing one another. Bamfield, small, stout,

enraged. Hallett tall, quiet, rather white. Karen stood clutching her notebook and pencil, ignored by both, her heart thumping with apprehension. After a short silence, Hallett raised his eyebrows.

"Now?"

"This minute! If you've not gone in five minutes' time, I'll have them throw you out. I've got no use for treacherous servants. I've yet to consider whether I take legal action against you for what you've done. . . ."

"I think," Hallett said levelly, "that you would find it hard to find adequate grounds——"

His hand went automatically to the drawer of his desk. Old Bamfield barked out, "Stop that!"

Hallett stopped, and looked at the other man with narrowed eyes.

"You've stolen all you're going to steal from this firm——"

Hallett said, quite smoothly, but with a venomous ring in the words:

"That's the second time you've used the word 'steal.' I'm not sure, Mr. Bamfield, that I shan't be suing *you* — for libel. There's a witness here, remember!"

The older man turned at that, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, I know! Your precious typist — the girl wonder! Get your hat and coat, miss, for you're going too. You needn't try to pretend that you were ignorant of what was going on, for you typed this letter, and you were fool enough to put your initials in the corner! Things have come to a pretty pass when the Sales Manager conspires with the office staff. . . ."

Karen winced under the accusation. She tried to stammer out that she wouldn't dream of staying, and was furious to find that agitation was driving tears to her eyes. She fled into her own room, just as she heard Hallett say, with fine sarcasm:

"I suppose you don't mind my taking my personal



letters and receipts? Perhaps you'd like to look through the file yourself?"

And the older man's blunt retort:

"I'm going to look through anything you try and take out of here, so don't fool yourself into thinking that you can get away with anything more. . . ."

Karen's mind worked swiftly as she closed the door between the two offices. Her heart was still thumping, but her thoughts were clear. Hastily throwing on coat and hat, she threw a glance at the tall, locked file in the corner . . . the records she had compiled with so much care were all stored there . . . could she, while Bamfield was raging away next door. . . .

Without stopping to think of what would happen if she were caught, she came to a quick decision. Swiftly, softly, she turned the key, and slid out the heavy steel drawer. She couldn't take everything, but some records were obviously more important than others. Making a hasty selection, she crammed them into the attaché-case which she so often carried, abandoned the library book and the knitting she had brought up in it, and, still moving quietly, lest she should attract Mr. Bamfield's further attention, she slipped out of her office into the corridor, and along to the stairs. Not daring to wait to call the lift, she ran down. As luck would have it, Barry Gage was coming up.

"Hullo!" he said surprised. "Where are you off to?"

Summoning every last ounce of her self-control, she tapped an airy finger on the attaché-case.

"Special job for Mr. Hallett!" she told him lightly. "I'm late, too - got to rush."

He glanced at his watch.

"Like me to take you wherever it is in a car?" he volunteered. "I've got twenty minutes or so——"

Karen moistened dry lips.

"No - don't bother - it might make you late, and I'll get a taxi outside——"

Her ears were strained for any sound from upstairs.

Suppose Mr. Bamfield came down and caught her . . . suppose. . .

Mercifully, Barry didn't argue.

"All right," he said, waving her on, "be off with you, independence. I've got some letters for you when you get back."

When she got back! With an almost sickening sense of relief, she ran through the swing doors, and out on to the pavement. She was free!

And yet, as long as she was still in sight of the Bamfield offices she didn't feel safe. Suppose Mr. Bamfield had discovered her flight - suppose he pursued her - she didn't imagine for a minute that he would flinch from the thought of making a scene in the street. And yet, where was she to go?

Almost automatically, as if Barry might still be watching, she raised a hand, and summoned a crawling taxi-cab. Gave the man her home address, and sank back thankfully against the cushions, the precious attaché-case still clasped tightly in her hand.

Steven wasn't a fool. He'd know where to get in touch with her. She could leave the next move in the game to him. And in the meantime. . .

A little smile of sheer triumph lit up her pale face. Bamfield had tried to exploit him, had made little of her - and between them they had outwitted him.

She'd taken a chance - but how much more she would have done to help Steven! The smile softened, as she imagined his gratitude, his delight, when he discovered what she had done.

## CHAPTER XX

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON before Steven Hallett finally turned up. Several times Karen thought of running out to a telephone box, of calling up his club to see if he were there . . . it wasn't easy, after all that had happened this morning, simply to sit and wait. But she rejected the idea in case he should come while she was out and find the flat empty and go away. Now and again, she threw up the sitting-room window, and looked for the cream-coloured sports car, but it was never there.

It had been a beastly business this morning. And what an abominable old man Mr. Bamfield was. . . . Karen shivered as she saw again his red, angry face, heard his harsh voice, remembered the things he had said. Steven had been marvellous, the way he kept his temper. Her eyes strayed to the precious attaché-case, lying on the table, and her spirits rose.

All that information in there represented Steven's work. If old Bamfield wouldn't treat him properly, it wasn't fair that he should profit from it. A ring at the door interrupted her thoughts, and sent her dashing to answer it. Her heart thudded sharply at the sight of Steven, standing there smiling at her, that gay, masterful smile of his.

"Think I was never coming?"

"I thought you'd come - sometime——"

He followed her into the sitting-room. Threw his hat on to a chair. Turned to Karen.

"Well, that was a nice business this morning, wasn't it? Pity it robbed me of the pleasure of telling the Old Man what

he could do with his job, but it doesn't matter much, when all's said and done."

She said, vehemently:

"It was *horrid*!"

Hallett laughed.

"The Old Man was mad, wasn't he? It stung him up to know that I was leaving - after he'd been *so* generous!"

"I expect," Karen said, "that it was mostly rage because you were going."

"Oh, I don't suppose he'd altogether forgotten those figures I showed him. Besides, he probably realises that I'll take a lot of his best customers away from him. He doesn't know about the Sarazen agency yet - he'll have an apoplectic fit when he hears about that! I nearly told him this morning, but I thought I'd wait and let him find out for himself. And since I left - at his urgent request - I've taken a signed order for a Rolls that would have gone to Bamfields if I'd still been there. And I am going to make sure that he hears about that, too!"

Karen sat gazing at him, completely rapt. He smiled a little at her ecstatic face.

"We're going to make things hum, I tell you!" Then, a sudden thought striking him, he said, "By the by, you did a pretty quick vanishing trick! He barged into your room and found you gone - it was a lovely anti-climax, and didn't improve his temper at all."

Karen nodded happily.

"Yes - I thought I'd better make sure we didn't leave all this behind for his benefit——"

Taking the attaché-case, she laid it on his knee and clicked it open. For an incredulous moment he stared - looked up at her and back at the papers. Ran swiftly through them, while she watched him with eager eyes. Threw back his head at last, and laughed till the tears stood in his eyes.

"You marvellous woman! I might have known! Ever since I walked out of the place, I've been cursing myself

for not taking this stuff away before — and to think that you whisked it off under the Old Man's nose——”

He sobered a little, and sat looking up at her, as she still stood before him, and something in his eyes set every drop of blood in her veins tingling. Smiling still, but differently, he reached out his hand and took hold of hers.

“Weren't you afraid the Old Man might catch you?”

She knew that the colour was rising to her face. The long lashes dropped, shadowing the grey eyes. She nodded faintly.

“Just a little——”

His clasp on her hand grew a little tighter.

“And yet you risked it? For me?”

“Yes. . . .”

It was only a whisper. With a swift, impetuous movement, he let the attaché-case slip to the floor and stood up, still holding her hand. Slipped the other arm round her.

“You did that for me, Kay? What would I ever do without you?”

Her breath was coming a little quickly . . . it was so wonderful to be here again, in his arms. Holding her firmly, he freed the hand which was holding hers, and slipped it under her chin. Tilted her face upwards, and looked down for a long delirious moment into her eyes. Bent his head, slowly, very deliberately, smiling a little — and then his lips were on hers. With a little sigh, Karen surrendered herself to the sheer happiness of the moment, forgetting Bamfields, forgetting the attaché-case on the floor, forgetting even Hallett Car Sales, and remembering only Steven Hallett.

A moment later, he had set her away from him with a gesture so abrupt as to be almost rough.

“You mustn't — let me do that too often!” he said, smiling again, his breath coming a little heavily. “You and I have got to work, Karen! We haven't time for — that sort of thing just yet——”



She stood, staring at him, a little confused, trying to bring her soaring wits to earth. He laughed, a little jerkily.

"I mean to say - a man who's just out of a job - who's got to start building up a business - mustn't go in for making love - it's too disturbing a process - when the girl is a girl like you. . . ."

She hardly understood what he was trying to tell her. But if he wanted a thing, it was enough. She said loyally, docilely :

"Yes, Steven. . . ."

He sat down in the chair again. Reached for the case, and opened it.

"Since you were so clever as to get these away," he said, his voice still not quite normal, "we've got to consider how we can make the best use of them. The showroom isn't quite ready, yet, but we can use the office. And thank heaven, I got some notepaper and that sort of thing printed. And since from this morning, you're the secretary of Hallett Car Sales Limited. . . ."

It sounded so wonderful . . . she forced herself to concentrate on what he was saying, and bit by bit she found her bemused brain waking up again. Half an hour later, when Louise walked in to the flat, there wasn't the slightest hint in Karen's manner, or in Steven Hallett's, of the high, emotional moment which had passed between them.

Hallett was sitting at the table, planning, dictating. Karen sat opposite, an improvised notebook of writing paper in front of her, her pencil flying. Louise stopped in the doorway, mildly astonished, as they looked up. Karen spoke first.

"Oh, hullo, Louise! This is Mr. Hallett. . . ."

Louise acknowledged the introduction, scrutinising the tall, dark young man with a critical eye. So this was Karen's marvellous employer.

"I'm afraid I've turned your sitting-room into an

office," he said, smiling. "We've done enough for to-day, though. I must be going. See you to-morrow at the office, Kay."

"Don't mind me," Louise said mildly. "I can feed in the kitchen——"

"Wouldn't dream of it!" Hallett expostulated swiftly. "In any case, Miss Winter has had quite enough work and excitement for one day."

He gathered the papers together, putting them back in the case. Karen held out her hand.

"I'll bring it with me in the morning. Don't you bother——"

"If you don't mind? I've got to try and look up one or two people——"

He smiled gratefully and surrendered it to her. Collected his hat, said his farewells and went. Karen slipped her improvised notebook in with the other papers, and followed Louise out to the kitchen.

"It's been an awfully exciting day——"

She had given Louise one or two hints as to what was in the wind. Now she could talk freely. Louise listened, as they prepared supper together, and Kay found something disturbing in her cool detachment. Finally she challenged it.

"Well - what's the matter?"

Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, nothing. Only I wonder - if you've been wise——"

"How?" Karen flared.

"Well - throwing up a steady job with an established firm, for a new venture."

"Of course I've been wise!" Karen retorted. "I'd never have got anywhere with Bamfields after Mr. Hallett left - they mightn't even have wanted to keep me on."

Louise said, sensibly:

"Oh, I think they would. You think Mr. Gage'll get the job now, don't you? The nice boy who was at Molly's wedding? He'd have kept you on all right."

"Maybe he would," Karen granted, "but he wouldn't have helped me on much. He's too old-fashioned. Doesn't believe in women in business taking any responsibility."

"Still, you'd have been safe——"

"Who wants that sort of safety? Besides, I'm safe enough. Mr. Hallett's going to look after me——"

"Hm. . . ."

It was a slow, drawn-out interrogative "hm." Karen flared again.

"What do you mean?"

"Well — he's got to take care of himself first, hasn't he? He's the sort to do it, anyhow——"

"He isn't!"

Louise stopped cutting bread for a moment, and studied Karen shrewdly.

"My dear," she said. "You're not very clear-sighted about that young man! He's very charming, of course, and you're in love with him, but——"

"I'm not!" Karen protested, crimson to the ears. "I'm not!"

Louise sighed patiently.

"All right — you're not! But you're completely besotted as far as he is concerned. He's got wings and a halo in your eyes. Well, I hope you're right, but——"

"You don't know anything about him!" Karen challenged.

"Maybe I don't — but I've seen his sort, often enough. Very charming, and very wonderful, as long as things go smooth. Very good at helping other people, when they're sitting pretty themselves. But *not* so good at tackling things when they get uncomfortable — and not liable to sacrifice their own comfort for other people's sake. I may be wrong, but that's how he strikes me."

"You're quite wrong!" Karen said hotly. "He isn't that sort at all."

"Anyhow," Louise persisted, "I'm sure you'd have been a lot wiser to stick to Mr. Gage. After all," she added,

with worldly wisdom, "a man who's in love with you will do more for you than a man you're in love with——"

"Oh, love - love - love!" Karen cried impatiently. "Can't you think of anything else? Who said that Barry Gage was in love with me?"

"I can," Louise agreed equably, "and no one said Barry Gage was in love with you, but I'm not quite blind. And I think you're a little idiot! There's a darned decent fellow, with plenty of money, crazy about you - he'd marry you to-morrow if you'd have him, and you needn't deny it - who'd give you a good home and a good time, and treat you marvellously - and you throw him down to slave yourself ragged for——"

She paused abruptly. Karen's eyes were blazing. Louise made a gesture of resignation with one smooth, beautifully manicured hand.

"Forget it!" she said. "I won't say another word. Except, of course, that I hope the new business is a howling success from the very start, and that Mr. Hallett doubles your salary within a year!"

Karen calmed down. After all, Louise simply didn't understand . . . she didn't know Steven Hallett as Karen did. She smiled.

"I hope you're right!" she said, adding with gallant optimism, "and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you were! And now let's eat - I'm frightfully hungry. I hardly had any lunch."

## CHAPTER XXI

FOR ALL HER COURAGE Kay's face was white and strained with sheer weariness when she looked up from her desk. She had been slogging away ever since the showroom closed at six o'clock, in a frantic endeavour to catch up with arrears of work, and the clock hands had slid round to eight, almost without her noticing it. She had had nothing, except a cup of tea and a biscuit since lunch, and her head was splitting.

Hallett tossed his hat down, threw himself into a chair, and began to pull papers from his pocket with an air of victory.

"Well - I got it!" he announced triumphantly. "Had to go to a stiff price for the old car, but there's the order for the new one, signed and sealed - and there's the cheque for the deposit."

Almost mechanically, Karen picked up the order-form, and glanced at the figures. A thin line of worry appeared between her brows.

"Two hundred and fifty. . . ."

"And it's worth half! I know. But Bamfields were up against me, and they'd bid that already, damn them! They're not so cautious as they used to be in the old days, before we made them sit up and take notice."

Karen leant back in her chair with a little sigh, aware for the first time that her back was aching.

"I suppose we'll get out all right," she said, smiling a little wearily. Hallett laughed.

"Of course we will! Tell you, Kay, I've got someone



in mind for that car already. Put a lick of paint on her, and a few gadgets and young Phillips will snap her up."

He probably would, Kay told herself stoutly, when Steven had done his stuff. She'd known all along he was a brilliant salesman, of course, but since the new business had started, he had been more brilliant than ever. It was rotten luck that everything seemed to have been against them, and especially that Bamfields seemed to have thrown their conservative policy to the winds.

Hallett was working out some figures in a notebook.

"That's the fourth order I've taken this week," he exulted, "and it's only Thursday. One a day. What d'you bet I keep it up to the end of the week, not excepting Saturday?"

"I expect you will," she said, sincerely; "only——" and she hesitated.

"Only what?"

"Aren't we getting rather heavily loaded up with second-hand cars? By the time we take them all over, we shall have pretty well all our capital tied up."

His lips were tight for the moment.

"It's the devil working away on a shoestring like this," he said bitterly, and then brightened up. "I'll just have to put in some salesmanship on our second-hand stock, for a while. It'll be all right, Kay. Don't worry. Did you do those letters for me?"

"I did. They're ready on your desk."

Whistling a little between his teeth, he went into his own office to sign them. Karen turned back to her books. Entered the last figures with a little sigh of relief, closed the ledger, and threw a half-hearted glance at a piled basket of papers awaiting filing. It was no good . . . she couldn't do any more to-night.

Steven had found a salesman — young, callow and inclined to be lazy, but with a persuasive tongue in his head.

There was a middle-aged mechanic and car-cleaner, who drove in an emergency, and did any odd jobs necessary. Those two, with herself, formed the entire staff of Hallett Car Sales Limited, and all the work of the office fell on Karen's shoulders.

She had taken it on gladly, and spared herself nothing. At a pinch, she would leave the letters she was typing to slip out into the showroom and deputise for Hallett or Mr. Winch just as readily as she would run round to the bank to pay in or cash cheques, or to the post office to buy stamps. She made a point of getting to the office by a quarter to nine, so that by the time Steven got there, the mail was neatly opened, and waiting for him. She dusted the office and made tea, and the telephone made incessant calls on her time. Indeed so full were her days that she had got into the habit of leaving book-keeping and filing to be done after six, when the office was closed, and she could at least give them her uninterrupted attention. But things seemed to be getting on top of her somehow. She looked up now, as he brought the letters back, signed.

"I wonder," she said tentatively, "do you think it would run to another girl, Mr. Hallett? Not an experienced one, of course, but a kid I could train. . . ."

He called her Karen and Kay freely now, but she stuck to the Mr. for office use. He shot a sharp glance at her.

"You're looking tired - look here, I'll help you stick these up," he suggested, sitting down, and beginning to fold the mail. "D'you think an inexperienced girl would be much good to you? People of that sort are usually more trouble than they are worth, and I don't want you fagging yourself out more, teaching some wretched girl how to do things - and probably having to do them yourself in the end."

Karen opened the post book, and began entering and stamping letters as he tossed them over to her.

"Perhaps you're right. . . ."

"Wouldn't you rather leave it till we can afford a really experienced girl? A real top-notch, who can help you with the books and all the rest of it, as well as the filing and donkey work? You see, I don't want you to go on slogging away like this. You're too good. I want to train you as a saleswoman. How'd you like that, Kay? And wouldn't it be a sensation? You'd be the first lady salesman in the trade. There have been a few society dames who played at it, but none who really knew their stuff. You'd demonstrate cars and do deals, as well as talking to people as you do now."

A little of Karen's weariness began to fall away from her. Her eyes shone.

"I'd love it!"

That was what life ought to be like. Never a dull, dead wall ahead of you, but always some alluring prospect to work for.

"It's about time, anyhow, that I taught you to drive," Hallett suggested, watching her closely. Her delighted glance flew to his face.

"Oh! will you?"

Barry Gage had said something once, ever so long ago, about teaching her to drive. But, of course, that had never come off. She hadn't even seen Barry once, since she had slipped away from him at Bamfields, with the precious attaché-case under her arm. And he wasn't very likely to teach her now, with Steven and Mr. Bamfield at daggers drawn.

"I will!" Steven promised lightly. "The very first Saturday afternoon we can fit it in, you shall have your first lesson."

She thumped the last stamp into place, and shuffled the letters together.

"I suppose," he said, "that you haven't had anything to eat for hours? I thought not. Look here, put on your hat and come along - we'll slip into that little snack bar round the corner and have something. I can't have

my right-hand woman starving herself to death. Remember, you've got to take care of yourself for my sake! What on earth would I do if you crocked up now?"

Funny to remember that twenty minutes ago she had been thinking that she was tired! Slipping into her coat, perching the little hat on top of her head, walking out at Steven's side, she felt as if new life had been poured into her. He paused, and shook the door to make sure that it was locked. Looked round for a moment or two, scowling.

"One of these days," he said, "we're going to have a decent showroom - damn it, a building!"

Karen looked faintly alarmed. True, they were tucked away in a long, rather dingy street, between a barber's and a greengrocer's, but - the rent was low, and there were heaps of other good points about the place. The street was wide, and parking did not present much difficulty. There was a petrol filling station just opposite, which saved them from having to stock petrol and comply with lots of regulations, and the proprietor had already passed two deals to Steven, on which even the shared profit was worth having.

He laughed down at her dubious face.

"Not all at once, I'm afraid!" he reassured her, "but no one ever got anywhere without being ambitious!"

Karen felt faintly, unreasonably ashamed of her want of faith in him. Wasn't it just because he was so ambitious, so brilliant, that he mattered so much to her?

"And now," he said, tucking his hand under her arm, "come along! I'm beginning to realise that I'm ravenous too. I don't think the snack bar will do - let's trot along to Alessandro's and have a grill."

Alessandro's. . . .

She had a quick vision of Barry Gage's face, that evening they had dined at Alessandro's. Of the quick change that had swept over it when she had tried to enlist him on Steven's side. Barry was such a dear - but——

Steven was hailing a taxi.

She couldn't help saying, as they started off :

"Barry Gage took me to Alessandro's that night - you remember? The very first time that you asked me to go out with you. And I'd said already that I would go with him, and I was so disappointed."

"Were you?" He looked down at her with his crooked, charming smile. Laid his hand over hers and held it. Asked, his voice changing a little: "See anything of Gage these days?"

She shook her head.

"Not since I left Bamfields."

Steven grinned, slightly malicious.

"He hasn't stepped into my shoes, after all! Did you know that? Old Bamfield hasn't appointed anyone Sales Manager yet - he's doing the job himself. Can't find anyone good enough, I suppose."

Illogically, Karen was aware of a slight regret. So Barry was disappointed again. He'd accept it, of course, but it must be rather - galling.

"And that, of course," Steven said, his voice hardening at the thought, "is why we're having to do such rotten deals!"

She looked at him, faintly surprised.

"Hadh't you guessed? He'd take a loss to get a sale away from me. . . ."

"No!"

She was faintly shocked.

"Indeed he would! There's nothing the old devil would like better than to see me go broke. He's bound to have guessed that I've only got a small capital, and that I couldn't stand a long succession of losses. Then, when he'd put me out of business and gloated over me, he'd go back to his old, cautious tactics."

They had reached the restaurant now, and they were silent till they had reached their table. Then Steven looked at her, with mock severity.



"No more shop while we eat!" he decided firmly. "I know there are all sorts of things we ought to talk about, but they can wait."

"All right, Mr. Hallett!" she said demurely. He scowled.

"Didn't I just tell you! You aren't having dinner with Mr. Hallett - but with a fellow you once went to Barnaby's with, if you can remember his name. . . ."

Kay smiled, flushing.

"All right, Steven!" she said meekly. He laughed and leant back.

"That's better! Ever - think of that night, Kay?"

"Sometimes," she admitted, her colour deepening a little.

"So do I!" he said softly, his eyes on her face. "That was the night I took out a very charming girl - and neglected her so badly that she nearly ran away from me. But - she forgave me in the end . . . didn't she?"

"I - think she did!" Kay's mouth was tender, her eyes starry at the remembrance of that night. Meeting his mischievous glance, reading all that it said, she felt again that thrilling tingle in her veins.

Later, when they left the restaurant, Steven said:

"I suppose your new sleeping partner will be at the flat? Otherwise, I might have come back with you, and we could have talked business. There are heaps of things I want to tell you, and I never seem to get time during the day."

Kay glanced at her watch.

"Louise has gone to a theatre to-night . . . she'll be late."

"Then may I? Even if it's only for half an hour."

"Of course."

He was rather silent in the taxi that took them back. Business affairs had come crowding into his mind again. The cheerful mood had forsaken him, and the world was beginning to look a black place. In spite of his optimistic

words to Karen, he knew very well indeed that the deals he had already negotiated would tie up all his small capital. Already he could hardly afford to do any more deals, unless he could be sure of turning over the second-hand car he took in part exchange immediately. And that wasn't the way you made money.

He was silent, therefore, and a little depressed when they reached the flat. Karen, sensitive to his mood, watched him and began to worry. Although weariness was creeping over her again, she forced herself to be alert, helpful. Together they went through figures, from the notes he had made in his pocket-book.

Presently, as he sat working out some calculations, she rose to her feet.

"I haven't anything to drink in the place," she said, "but I'm going to make you a strong cup of tea."

He looked up to protest, but she brushed his protests away. Left him busy with his figures, and vanished into the kitchen, to reappear presently with a tray. He looked up gratefully, as she placed the steaming cup at his elbow.

"Trying to mother me now, Kay?"

She'd never seen him like this before - rather white and tired, and discouraged-looking. The dark eyes baffled instead of bright. Shoulders a little hunched, instead of erect. She said soothingly:

"Do you mind?"

"I rather like it - from you!" He reached out and took her hand. Not masterfully, this time, but rather like a child that needs comforting.

"I'm feeling damnably blue," he admitted; "those figures aren't too good, and - because I'm tired, I suppose - I'm beginning to wonder if I really can sell those old crocks, and go on getting orders, or if Bamfield's really going to get me down. . . . He's precious near doing it, Kay."

She thought, panic-stricken . . . I've never seen him like this before. . . . I've got to do something. Her chin shot up.

"You know you don't really wonder anything of the sort! You'll sell every one of those cars, at better figures than we've allowed for. And you'll get some better deals - after all, you're not always up against competition from Bamfields. And, anyhow, you can wipe the floor with them, big as they are. . . ."

It was her turn to be madly, firmly optimistic. She couldn't bear to see him like this, depressed, down. Her heart ached, but she managed to smile brightly, as he turned to look into her eyes, studying her intently to see if she really meant what she was saying. To her vast relief she saw his expression begin to lighten. His mood began to turn.

"Good Lord, Kay," he said, "you're wonderful! You run that office for me, keep everything going so that I have nothing to worry about, buck me up when I'm blue! You're right - of course you're right! I'm damned if they're going to get me down. Only" - his expression was rueful - "you've got to admit that it would be a lot easier, a lot less worrying, if we had just a little more money to come and go on. Even a thousand would do. . . . I wonder if I could raise it somewhere. . . ."

Even a thousand. . . . Kay thought suddenly, as if remembering something she had forgotten . . . but I've got a thousand pounds!

She had pretty well forgotten it. There hadn't been any time to go buying those new clothes she had planned on. There certainly hadn't been time to think about investments. It was still lying there in the bank. With suddenly leaping spirits, she said:

"You can raise it! I've got it. An old cousin left me some money - a thousand pounds - and I haven't invested it yet. Let me invest it in Hallett Car Sales Limited!"

In spite of her weariness, a wave of real happiness had rushed over her - happiness and gratitude to the cousin who had made it possible for her to do this for Steven, just when

he needed it so badly. She sat smiling at him, watching his amazement with delight. He stared at her for an incredulous minute.

"You mean——"

"I do!" she nodded. "It's there in the bank. I can draw it out to-morrow."

A spark of new hope had come to light in his eyes, he began to smile . . . then his face changed, and he shook his head.

"I can't let you, Kay! It's all you've got. Suppose you lost it. . . ."

"I shan't lose it," she said. "You're going to use it to make lots more for me! If I invest it, I shall only get three or four per cent; Hallett Car Sales will probably pay ten at the end of the year."

Again his flagging spirits reacted to her optimism. He looked at her closely for a minute. . . .

In his heart of hearts, he knew he'd been right a moment ago when he had said he shouldn't allow her to do it. Shouldn't encourage her to take such a gamble with her tiny fortune, when she could tuck it away safely, beyond all fear of loss. But. . . .

But it would make such an amazing difference if only he had a little more money to work with. Already his mind was travelling forward to the new deals it would enable him to secure. Already he was feeling a sense of relief, as if the money were already in the firm's bank account. He leaned forward, and took both of her hands in his.

"I shouldn't let you do it — but I'm going to! Kay, Kay, what should I ever do without you? You're my luck, my good angel. . . ."

Drawing her closer, he took her into his arms. Held her there, so that he could feel the beating of her heart. Felt his own begin to beat in tune. Bent his head, so that when he spoke his mouth was very near to hers.

"Kay . . . I said there mustn't be any more of this until —

but . . . Listen, Kay, when my ship comes in, do you know what we're going to do? "

She shook her head, her lips curving with the happiness which he always brought her. His next words set her beating heart to jumping madly.

" We're going to get married . . . you will marry me, won't you, Kay - my darling? "



## CHAPTER XXII

"YOU BEAT ME," Louise said flatly, studying Karen with a puzzled eye. "When it comes to work, there's no holding you. You've got every confidence in yourself, and you go right ahead. You've got faith in your own ability. But when it comes to looks and charm and things like that, you're so humble that you can't believe your luck when a man asks you to marry him. . . ."

"Not any man," Karen protested. "Steven's so - different. Oh, Louise - I've loved him so" - (Didn't I tell you that? Louise muttered) - "but I've never dared to admit it, even to myself, because I couldn't believe he'd ever care for me. . . ."

Louise was getting ready for bed, and Karen had come to talk. She was perched now, on the arm of Louise's easy chair, bright-eyed, curls rioting, glowing with happiness. Louise snapped a shoulder strap, as she pulled a slim, pink slip over her head, and muttered a stifled curse.

"I'd better put a stitch in the thing now - won't have time in the morning," she said, rummaging needles and silk out of her work-box. "Well, Kay, I can only wish you the best of luck. . . ."

"I've got it already!" Karen told her, almost soberly. The fair girl shot her a queer, rueful, pitying glance.

She had come home from the theatre, five minutes after Steven had asked Karen to marry him, and there was no keeping the secret from her, although they had decided to keep it from the rest of the world for the time being.

"We're going to wait till we're making pots of money," Steven had told Louise, "and then we're going to leave the

business to run itself, and get married and barge off on our honeymoon."

Kay, sitting silent, but rapturously happy, within the circle of his arm, had nodded. Louise said now, curiously:

"But why all the secrecy? Why aren't you going to be publicly engaged right away?"

Karen said:

"It mightn't be wise - we're both in the same business——"

She had kept to herself the extent to which they were now in the same business. For some subconscious reason she didn't want Louise to know that to-morrow she would draw her first and last cheque on that new account in the bank, and that the thousand pounds of her inheritance would be exchanged for shares in Hallett Car Sales Limited. Louise wouldn't approve - of course, Louise didn't understand. If she didn't know, she couldn't be critical, and it hurt Karen, in her blind adoration of Steven, that anyone should doubt his sincerity or his ability.

In spite of her natural hardness, Louise felt a small pang of regret for the other girl. You might marry for love, if you were foolish, as Molly had done. You might marry for money, if you got the chance - Louise meant to do that if she could - but you ought to get the one thing or the other out of the deal, said her philosophy, and she had a shrewd idea that in the long run, Karen would get neither. Those keen blue eyes of hers saw through the charm of Steven Hallett to the real Steven beneath, and Louise was too much a woman of the world to like what she saw. She simply didn't believe in him. And here was this poor kid...

She stitched the shoulder strap with meticulous neatness. Why worry? People were making fools of themselves all the time, and finding it out too late. She said now, quite casually:

"So - that is why you refused to take any interest in Barry Gage?"

"Of course!" Karen told her, flushing. "Barry's a dear, of course, but who could look at him while Steven was there? . . ."

"I could!" thought Louise promptly. "Look at him? I'd jump at him, if I got the chance!" Aloud she said:

"I liked him. Pity he doesn't come here any more. . . . I might have had a shot at him myself, since you don't want him."

"Why——"

Karen hesitated. It had been on the tip of her tongue to say she would ring Barry up the next day, and ask him round. After all, wouldn't it be rather nice if he could be induced to transfer his affections to Louise, since she liked him so much? Rather odd that hard-headed Louise should think so much of slow old Barry — but there was no accounting for tastes. And just as Molly had tried, during her engagement days, to play matchmaker for Karen, so Karen now automatically wanted to turn matchmaker for Louise. But — it wouldn't do, she decided, regretfully. Barry was in the enemy's camp. She couldn't be friendly with him, when Bamfields were behaving so abominably to Steven.

She'd been sorry that she hadn't been able to see more of Mrs. Gage, but she couldn't go round to the pleasant flat without the risk of running into Barry. Now she said, hesitatingly:

"Well, maybe you'll run into him again one of these days. . . ."

"Maybe I will," Louise agreed drily. "And now, young Karen, you'd better be off to bed! It's past two, and though love's young dream may be good enough for you, I'd like to get some sleep in before I start another day's work!"

Flushed, apologetic, Karen took her departure, to slip into bed and lie for a while awake, hands behind her head, staring into the darkness and rapt in happy visions. And then sleep swept over her — until suddenly and all too soon, it was morning again, and Louise was calling her to get up. . . .

All too soon, till she remembered just why she had wakened with that feeling of blissful happiness, and the remembrance sent her scurrying out of bed to bathe and dress and rush to the office, where she would see Steven again.

. . . . .

The weeks that followed did nothing to dispel her happiness. Rather the reverse.

Two days after she had become a shareholder in the firm, Hallett had come rushing into the office, his face alight with triumph. Behind the closed door, he had caught her in his arms, and swung her into the air.

"Didn't I tell you you were my luck!" he had cried exultantly. "I've done two good deals to-day - and I ran into Lucilla Sandle just now, and she wants two new cars - *two*, Kay! Said Bamfields had been after her for the orders, too, and she simply laughed at them! There'll be a clear five hundred profit in that lot. Gosh, what a woman she is!"

Karen, who had detested Lucilla Sandle ever since her intrusion on the night of the dinner at Barnaby's, experienced a sudden change of heart.

"Steven! How marvellous!"

"I'll say it is! She wants me to have dinner with her to-night, and talk about details. So our date will have to be postponed, I'm afraid."

"Of course!" Karen agreed promptly, with a little pang of regret. They were to have dined together, for the first time since their engagement - but of course, personal concerns had to go to the wall where business was concerned - for the time being, anyhow. She said teasingly, with a happy confidence that was new to her:

"Don't you go making love to Lucilla!"

Steven grimaced.

"That old battleship! Is it likely? But I'll make love to her money all right, my sweet! A few more like Lucilla,

and we could bring a certain event a whole lot nearer. . . ."

Karen flushed and her eyes were soft with happiness. She was prettier than ever these days, in spite of the fact that she was working as hard as ever. Steven stared at her face, his eyes narrowing, and his clasp tightened.

"God - but you're lovely!" he said, a little hoarsely. "Kiss me, Kay!"

She would have kissed him lightly, laughingly, but his mouth was eager, insistent. She was breathless when he set her down, and stirred in every fibre of her being.

"Oh!" she said. "Steven, you shouldn't! Not - here——" And she backed away from him as he made another laughing swoop towards her. "You said——"

"I've said a lot of foolish things in my time!" he told her recklessly. "Come here, Kay!"

But she held out defensive hands as he moved towards her.

"No - no - oh, Steven, do be sensible!"

She hardly knew why it scared her so when he had these reckless moods. It wasn't only that they were in the office. After all, if the lone salesman, or the mechanic, had come in upon them, it wouldn't have mattered. They were engaged, and they could have said so if explanations had been necessary. But there was work to be done - so much work for both of them - if marriage were ever to come within their reach. Even the filing that was piled up in her own little office, waiting for her, even the unentered books, even the potential customers that he might be following up . . . all these things, undone, stood between them and their complete happiness. She said now, primly and firmly:

"I've got a frightful lot to do - though I can stay late to-night, now. And there was that 'phone call from the man who wants a second-hand Rolls. . . ."

Steven grinned ruefully, but made no further move to detain her.

"Aren't you the little slave-driver? All right, my sweet,



you're perfectly justified. Let's get on with the good work. . . ."

And blowing her a kiss he let her go.

. . . . .

Steven left the office very promptly that night, in time to change for his dinner with Lucilla Sandle. Karen worked on alone till past eight, too happy to feel tired, and when she left at last she decided to have some food before she went home. It would save trouble, and anyhow, Louise wouldn't be in - this was one of her class nights. She'd have some sandwiches and a glass of milk at the little snack bar round the corner.

She was sorry, once there, that she'd chosen the snack bar, for the high stools weren't very restful when you were weary, but it was too late, for the food she had ordered appeared promptly before her. She'd eat it quickly, she thought, and go home and get into her pyjamas, and sit and read for a while before she turned in. She was meditatively eating an egg and cress sandwich, when someone - a very fair someone, in plain fours - perched himself on the next stool and called for smoked salmon. Recognising the voice she swung round, before stopping to think, and found herself staring straight into the surprised blue eyes of Barry Gage. It hurt, rather, to see the shadow that flickered over them before he smiled and said, quite naturally:

"Hullo, Karen! It's a long time since I've seen you."

Karen gulped a little.

"Yes," she agreed, unthinking. "I haven't seen you since I left Bamfields——"

And then, though she broke off suddenly, she knew that they were both thinking of the same thing - of that last, hurried encounter on the stairs, when she was slipping away with the precious attaché-case under her arm.

"No," he said quietly, "not since then."

There was a moment's silence. And then Karen enquired for his mother.

"She's very well, thanks. She was saying only the other day how sorry she was you hadn't been round."

"I wanted to come . . ." Karen said, "but I thought - I was afraid——"

She halted, uncertain how to continue. Barry smiled, quite gently.

"Afraid you'd run into me? Well, am I such a frightful bore?"

"No! Of course not!" Karen stuttered hastily, "only - only - I thought - things are so different now. . . ."

She was angry with herself for this sense of embarrassment that possessed her. Grateful, in a way, for his matter of fact acceptance of her hesitation, which made things easier for her.

"As far as business goes, you mean? You're not worrying about that, surely! Of course, I'm sorry you decided to leave Bamfields, but I hope you'll do well with Hallett."

There was an almost imperceptible change of tone in the last words. A stiffness. Even Barry Gage couldn't infuse sincerity into them.

"You do? That's nice of you. And of course we're going to do well. . . ."

Inwardly, Barry flinched at that "we." Those blue eyes of his were very observant. They hadn't missed the new radiance about Karen, the new light in her eyes, and the lilt in her voice told its own tale. He said quietly:

"Well, anyhow, now that we've met again, you won't have any hesitation about coming round, will you? I mean to say, mother would genuinely like to see you and of course I should too, if I were at home."

When he put things like that, it seemed suddenly silly to think of him as being "in the enemy's camp." And it would be awfully nice to see Mrs. Gage again. Nice, too, Karen was honest enough to admit, to be friends with

Barry after this horrid interlude of uncertainty and stiffness. She said :

"Of course I'll come ! I hope Mrs. Gage doesn't think I've been horribly rude - I mean to say, I've honestly been terribly busy. There's so much to do——"

"I'm sure she understands," Barry said promptly, soothingly. "I'll tell her I saw you to-night and explain everything. Mother isn't the sort of person who goes round taking offence, anyhow."

"I'm sure she isn't," Karen said gratefully. She smiled at him, frankly, friendly, never guessing how a knife turned and twisted in the man's heart as she did so. But he wasn't the sort of person to give up the fight before it was definitely and decisively lost. He'd go on hoping, Barry would, until . . .

He refused to go any further. There were one or two possible "untils" in his mind, and with one exception, each was hurtful. He said, changing the subject :

"Seen anything of Molly and Jim lately ?"

Karen shook her head.

"No. Molly's hardly ever in town and I've been too busy to go out there more than once since they came back."

It wasn't quite true. She was nearly always late at night, of course, but there were the week-ends. But . . .

It was rather an awkward journey to get to Molly's place. And Karen was always so tired when she got time to relax. And the week-ends were the only chances she got to do her mending, her hair washing, her manicure, and . . .

In her heart of hearts she knew that the reason she didn't want to acknowledge was the one which had kept her back. Molly was too clear-sighted. Understood her too well.

Before her engagement to Steven, she wouldn't have wanted Molly's shrewd eyes to see her moodiness, her nerviness. And now, would she be able to keep the secret ?

She gave her shoulders a small shake, and came to a sudden resolve. She'd go - and this very next Sunday. She made it aloud, and Barry smiled.

"Grand! Molly's invited me to tea. Shall I pick you up and run you down? Jim and I can smoke in the garden while you girls gossip."

Like Barry, that, Karen thought, almost subconsciously. Kind. Helpful. He must know that Molly's suburb was difficult to reach from the flat. Almost without thinking, she accepted his offer as even the nicest women accept things, without thinking, from the Barry Gages of this life.

"That would be lovely! Will you really?"

"Of course I will. Be ready about two? Fine..."

They chatted on, a little desultorily, until Karen had finished her sandwiches and milk. Then, as she slid off her stool, Barry stood up to accompany her.

"I'll walk to the bus with you."

It was getting dark. The streets were cool, and very quiet. There was something very restful simply in strolling along them with Barry striding beside her.

Not until she was on the bus, homeward bound, did Karen remember Louise's half jokingly expressed interest in him... and then she decided that on Sunday she would issue an invitation to feed at the flat some evening. Give Louise the chance she had laughingly wished for... after all, he might take a fancy to Louise...

While Barry, walking home alone, set his teeth grimly, and made himself a promise...

"If he doesn't treat her decently... I'll break his infernal neck!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE FIRST THING MOLLY SAID when she and Karen were alone together was :

"You're looking awfully thin, Kay, thinner than ever. I suppose you're working too hard."

Karen laughed and something in that laugh reassured Molly. It was so completely happy.

"Working like a nigger!" she confessed, "and loving it! There's a tremendous kick in working for a business you're interested in——"

She broke off abruptly. She hadn't meant that to slip out. Fortunately, however, Molly didn't take her literally. She smiled affectionately.

"You've been interested in every business you've ever worked for. Anyhow, I'm glad you found time to come and see us at last."

Karen said lamely, with a sense of guilt :

"I've been wanting to come for ages, only one thing and another . . . I've had the week-ends, of course, but somehow there's always seemed to be so much to do. And I've been so tired . . ."

"Oh, I know," Molly agreed equably, "I understand, Kay. You know that. And it was nice that Barry could run you out to-day and save you that wretched journey. He's a nice soul. . . ."

She watched Kay out of the corner of her eye as she spoke. She had never quite given up the hope that one day Kay might return Barry Gage's interest in her. She was vaguely disappointed that there was no self-consciousness in Kay's reply.



"Awfully nice - and his mother's a dear——"

They were on a tour of inspection of Molly's little house. Karen had seen it before, of course, when they decided to take it, and had managed to give some help, despite her busyness, in the arranging and making of plans, but she had never seen it as it was now, with curtains at every window, and every room completely furnished. It was pretty and simple, with pinks and blues in the little bedrooms, and a cool green in the dining-room. The furniture was plain - practical Molly had set her face firmly against "dust-traps" - but very comfortable. And one or two wedding presents gave it an air of modest luxury.

Karen and Molly were talking in the spare bedroom, looking out at the back. Molly threw up the window and leaned on the sill.

"Jim's showing Barry the garden," she told Karen amusedly, "he's quite absurd about it - of course we can't do much with it this year, but you should hear the plans he's making; and it will be rather nice to have our own vegetables and things."

She waved an arm, and the two men looked up and smiled. Karen thought, with a sudden sense of revelation, Jim looks different. Happier, more contented, less serious. He'd always been rather sober-minded in the old days, now he looked infinitely lighter of heart. She remembered how often and how enviously he had admired the comfort of the little flat, comparing it with his digs. Now Molly had surrounded him with all that homely comfort. Karen thought, one of these days I'm going to make a home for Steven, and her heart quickened a little.

Looking sideways at Molly, she regretted the decision she and Steven had come to, not to tell anyone of their engagement. She hadn't been thinking of Molly when she agreed with him that it was best kept quiet for the time being. After all, Molly wasn't just anyone . . . she was someone very special, and quite different. On a sudden, inexplicable impulse, she decided that Molly must be an exception. She

said, linking her arm in the other girl's as they turned away from the window :

"Listen, Moll, I've got something to tell you. Only it's a dead secret, and you mustn't even let Jim know——"

The half of her secret was told before she had said another word. The soft little smile that curved her mouth, the radiance that danced in her eyes, had a tale to tell that someone much blinder than Molly could have read. She gave a little gasp of excitement.

"Kay! You're not——"

"I am!" Karen nodded. "I'm engaged, Molly - only we don't want anyone to know yet——"

"But who——"

There was puzzlement in Molly's eyes. Barry Gage was out there in the garden, talking to Jim. He'd been just the same old Barry - and men weren't half as good at keeping things of that sort to themselves as women were. Was it - no, it couldn't be Barry. So - who?

Karen said softly :

"It's Steven - Mr. Hallett——"

Molly's eyes widened, and a look of uncertainty came into her face.

"Not?"

"My boss. Yes. Oh, Molly, I'm so happy! I've been crazy about him for ages, and I didn't think he could ever care for me."

It was the same tale she had told Louise, and just as misgivings had beset her, so they beset Molly.

True, she had never met Steven Hallett. But she had formed her own idea of him, partly from what Karen had said, and partly from what Barry Gage hadn't said. It wasn't a reassuring picture - not when it was labelled "Husband for Kay."

"Why shouldn't he care for you?" she demanded stoutly.

"I don't know," Karen said with unconscious humility.

"Only—it just didn't seem possible. And then it happened."

Like Louise, Molly wanted to know the reason for the secrecy. Like Louise, she found it rather unsatisfactory. There was something wrong about it. Something still more wrong in Karen's humble acceptance of anything and everything that Steven Hallett ordained. It wasn't like Karen. However . . .

"My dear, I'm awfully glad. I hope you're going to be just as happy as Jim and I are."

Her glance travelled through the window to the two unconscious figures below, and a pang of regret struck her on Barry Gage's behalf. This would be a blow to him when he heard of it, she decided. No use trying to pretend anything else; he was very much in love with Kay. And, knowing what she did, she thought, with hot partisanship: It's a shame! That man Hallett seems to get everything that Barry wants—his job—his girl——

She said, voicing a part of her thought:

"Barry's going to be upset when he knows——"

Karen flushed.

"I don't see why! Oh, I know he did think for a short time that he was in love with me, but he isn't now. We're friends, that's all, and he'll find someone else."

Molly shook a wise head.

"He won't. He isn't that sort of person. You know, Kay"—there was a little, soft wonder in her voice—"you're an awful baby about men. You don't understand them a bit."

"Maybe I don't!" There was laughter and a hint of chagrin in Kay's tone. "I suppose you do—now that you're an old, married woman——"

"I knew more about them when I was sixteen than you do to-day," Molly told her, unruffled. "But you'll learn——"

And I hope the lesson isn't too bitter a one! she added mentally.

The more she thought over Kay's news, the more uneasy and uncertain she became. She had wanted, because she was fond of Kay, and hated the thought of her always having to face the world alone, to see her married. But she had never thought of Kay marrying anyone like Steven Hallett. A vague sense of foreboding told her . . . it'll make everything different. Marriage with Hallett would set a wider gulf between Karen and herself than ever. She felt, without acknowledging it even to herself, that an insurance clerk like Jim would be very far below Hallett's social standards, and the thought stirred an angry resentment in her. After all, why should she feel that about Hallett, when Barry Gage was so completely different. . . .

But it had taken something of the pleasure out of the afternoon for her.

They drifted downstairs presently, and began to get tea. Barry and Jim came in from the garden, and again, from the way Barry's eyes flew to Karen's face, Molly had confirmation of his feeling for her.

And he'd be so kind, she thought angrily. He wouldn't let her go on slaving away—

And that was one of the things which had stood between Karen and Barry from the very beginning! Because Kay was idiot enough to insist that she liked working, and liked responsibility . . . and Barry didn't think either was altogether fair for a woman. That it was a man's job to look after his wife.

Why can't she see! Molly thought desperately. Why can't she see!

It was so incomprehensible to Molly that Karen should look at life as she did. Find more happiness in typewriters and files and ledgers, than in a home and domesticity . . . she didn't guess that loving Steven Hallett had changed something—was changing it still further, though very slowly—in Kay.

Presently, when she was alone with Barry, it was all she could do to keep Kay's confidence.

"It was nice of you to bring Kay out," she told him, smiling. "It's a horrid journey, I know, and she's so terribly busy these days——"

Barry's smile was distinctly non-committal.

"Listen," Molly said suddenly, impulsively. "I'm not happy about Karen, Barry! I think she's working far too hard, and I wish she hadn't left Bamfields——"

"So do I!" Barry agreed quietly.

"Why on earth did she do it?"

He shrugged his shoulders, reluctant to speak.

"Do you think this man Hallett's going to make a success of things?"

Barry smiled slowly, a smile that was curiously lacking in mirth.

"I don't know, Molly. I hope so, for Karen's sake."

Molly made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, Barry! You needn't be so fearfully cautious with me!"

His smile faded, and for a moment or two he looked very serious.

"Honestly, Molly, I can't say. He's clever, of course—in some ways. But——"

"But what?" she probed.

"Oh, I don't know. He doesn't look at things, some things, as I do. I shouldn't judge him. . . ."

"Listen, Barry," Molly said slowly, impressively, "I wish you'd tell me the truth! I only know that he's left Bamfields and started on his own, and that Karen has gone with him and thinks he's wonderful. And I don't feel easy in my mind about her. And I don't quite know why. But I'd rather know, than go on worrying in the dark. You know I'm safe. . . ."

He smiled, briefly, flickeringly.

"I know that. Well, Molly, here's the truth. It wouldn't worry me at all if Karen weren't involved. As it is—— Anyhow, Hallett chose to get fed up with Bamfields—why I don't know, for the Old Man had given him plenty of



breaks. Instead of throwing his hand in, he decided to start on his own, and he spent most of his time trying to get customers — new ones and old ones of the firm's — for his new business. The Old Man caught him out, and threw him out at a moment's notice. And because Karen was implicated, she got the sack, too."

"Oh——" Molly stared at him aghast. "But was she really implicated, Barry?"

He fidgeted uncomfortably.

"I don't think she realised what she was doing. I don't think she understands it yet. But, you know how loyal she is? Well, she'd decided that her loyalty was due to Hallett, and I'm sure she didn't see that there was anything wrong in helping him. . . ."

"Perhaps she didn't know what he was doing," Molly suggested staunchly. Barry looked up quickly.

"Oh, yes, she did! As a matter of fact, Molly, the Old Man doesn't know till this day, but she cleared out with a whole lot of records that Hallett would never have been able to get away with himself. . . . I met her on the way. . . . She doesn't know that I know, and I don't want her to. After all, the Old Man couldn't get them back now, and he's got it in hot enough for Hallett . . . it wouldn't do any good for him to go after Karen, too."

Molly stared, her heart going down to her boots.

"Oh, Barry! It's all that wretched ambition of Karen's. . . . I suppose this man Hallett has told her all sorts of wonderful things. . . ."

Kay, who had once been so clear-sighted! Molly said miserably:

"What's going to happen when . . . if . . . she ever finds out. . . ."

"It's going to hit her pretty hard, I'm afraid," Barry said soberly. They were silent for a minute or two. Molly was facing up, with inward horror, to the revelations she had just heard regarding the man Karen was secretly engaged to. Barry, unaware how far things had actually

gone, was wondering what the future was going to bring, wondering if Karen would ever have any use for him. Then, noticing Molly's intense depression, he tried to cheer her up.

"After all, it isn't so bad as it actually looks to us. Some people would think it was simply smart business on Hallett's part. I'm sure he does, himself. And I daresay that old Bamfield will leave him alone when he's got over his rage. . . ."

That aspect of the affair hadn't caught Molly's attention before. She asked now:

"What do you mean?"

"Only," said Barry grimly, "that there's nothing he wants at the moment as much as to smash Hallett!"

He stopped, as he saw the alarm that spread over Molly's face.

"At the worst," he said soothingly, "it'll only mean that Kay is out of a job again. And I expect I could manage to do something about that. . . ."

He was sorry he'd told that part of the tale, for somehow his last words didn't seem to have reassured Molly, though he repeated them with more conviction than the first time. He couldn't guess what she was thinking. . . .

Things were bad enough as they were. But what chance of happiness did Karen stand if Hallett were . . . smashed?

## CHAPTER XXIV

It was beginning to look as if Lucilla Sandle might be the salvation of Hallett Car Sales Ltd. It would have shocked Karen to realise how much she – quite subconsciously – hated the brewery millionairess on that account.

The thousand pounds which Karen had put in had staved off disaster. But the new customers whom Lucilla introduced were undoubtedly responsible for the increased sales which were beginning to put the firm on its feet again – and so lightening Steven Hallett's heart. Lucilla was powerful, and Karen, being only human, envied her that power with a bitter envy.

What she had been able to do became so insignificant, when it was compared with what Lucilla had done, so carelessly, so easily. Even when Steven cheerfully decided that they could now afford to employ another girl in the office to help her, Karen found it impossible to be properly grateful. She would rather, she thought at times, have gone on slogging away, working till all hours of the night, helping Steven, and hugging the fact to her heart, than be placed as she now was. And, actually, life wasn't much easier.

Steven was out a great deal more since Lucilla had taken him under her wing.

"What you need," she had told him shrewdly, "are contacts – more and more new contacts. You're an attractive young man, Steven Hallett, and you'll get business easily enough. But people won't buy cars from you, just for the sake of your *beaux yeux* – even I wouldn't do that!" She had glanced at him, boldly, provocatively,

out of her liquid dark eyes, and he had laughed and protested. "*But* – if they know you and like you, they'll come to you when they want cars – so the more people you get to know, the more business you're likely to get."

It was sound enough reasoning. Lucilla was like that. It amused her to pose on occasion as unbusinesslike and capricious, but beneath that pose there lurked any amount of calculating common sense. It pleased her to play the spoilt, rich woman with people like Ian Foster, who might be expected to prefer their femininity feminine. It intrigued her to turn another side of her character to Steven Hallett. She added :

"You shouldn't spend your time chasing orders for cheap second-hand cars – leave that to your assistant. You go out for the people with money, who'll buy Rolls-Royces and Lanchesters and Daimlers – and can afford to pay for their fancy. The others aren't big enough game for *you*."

It was sensible, and it was flattering. Steven shrugged his shoulders, and murmured something about bread and butter. Lucilla Sandle laughed.

"Oh – if you like bread and butter ! But I didn't think you did ! I thought that caviare was more in your line."

Her dark eyes teased and mocked him. He was vividly aware of her expensive perfume, her lovely clothes, her whole atmosphere of opulent success. He began to forget that he had ever referred to her contemptuously, and eyed her with genuine admiration and respect.

"If I'm wrong ?" He shook a vigorous head. "Well, then, do as I say. Get out and about. Don't make ridiculous excuses about demonstrating second-hand two-seaters when I ask you to dinner ! You won't meet – second-hand two-seater people – at my house !"

Later, Steven told Karen all about it.

"She's right, Kay, you know," he commented, his eyes glowing with enthusiasm, "that's where the money's to be made."

Karen said slowly :



"I suppose so. Only . . ."

"You don't imagine that Bamfields live on the sales of cheap cars?" he asked impatiently. "They probably pay their stamp account! But the rent and the profits come from the big stuff. And, by God, one of these days I'm going to show them that I can handle as much big stuff as they do. Lucilla's right - I'm not a cheap-business man. I can't make money in little bits. The big stuff is my game. . . ."

He looked discontentedly round the little showroom.

"I'm beginning to think I was wrong to take this place," he added slowly, "people don't expect to buy Rolls-Royces in back streets. We should have taken a chance, and gone into Piccadilly, or something like that."

Just for a moment her ambition caught fire from his. And then fear invaded her heart. When you have very nearly starved to death, bread and butter looks so good, that you are suspicious of caviare. She said, doubtfully:

"I hope we'll do it one day, Steven. But——"

"We're going to do it a lot sooner than you think!"

He was exuberant. For nearly a month now, they had been running at a profit. It might be coincidence, of course, but Bamfields seemed to have shown a little less vicious energy in cutting prices when they were in competition. Karen had noticed that, and had wondered at it vaguely. Hallett didn't guess that he was answering a question in her mind when he said, rather scornfully:

"Gage is Sales Manager of Bamfields now. Did you know that? He'll be happy at last - and I wish him joy of the job!"

Karen looked up quickly.

"Oh, is he? I'm awfully glad. . . ."

He eyed her closely, and when he spoke again his voice was lightly mocking.

"I thought you would be! You've always had a weakness for the fellow."

She looked up, sharply reproachful. He laughed.



"No? He's got one for you, you know!"

She could feel herself reddening. Hallett laughed again. Reached out an arm, and drew her rather roughly to him.

"That's his bad luck, isn't it, my sweet? He can't have you, because I want you——"

It sounded so marvellous, that "I want you." Kay didn't stop to think of the implication behind the words . . . if I hadn't wanted you. . . .

She was rather quiet, with her head against his shoulder. He bent to look at her more closely.

"Not getting tired of me, are you?"

Vehemently she shook her head. He gave a little, satisfied laugh.

"Kiss me, then, Kay!"

Obediently, she raised her face. Inevitably, her pulses drummed, and the blood tingled through her veins. Doubts and uncertainties fell away from her.

He was kissing her now. Not, at first, with the involuntary hunger he had once shown, but deliberately. His lips touched her throat, and she could feel her heart leap and thud in her breast.

"Sweet thing, aren't you?" he said caressingly. His arms tightened about her, and he was suddenly less deliberate, more ardent, more demanding. Kay was again aware of that sense of burning happiness — that feeling that the world held only the two of them, and that everything, everyone else in the world — even Lucilla Sandle — was completely and utterly unimportant.

. . . . .

And so, for a while, life went on, seeming to have found for itself a pleasant enough groove — one which led uphill, certainly, but which was not too difficult to travel.

Karen was more at peace than she had been for some time. She was glad to be on friendly terms again with Barry Gage — since the renewal of their friendship, he had

become quite a frequent visitor at the flat, and he and Louise seemed to get on excellently. Karen even teased him about her once, and was faintly piqued by the non-committal good humour with which he parried her teasing. Louise was franker.

"I'd have him to-morrow if I could get him," she admitted lightly. "I think you're a fool to turn him down, Kay, but if you don't want him . . ."

He even took Louise out to a theatre once or twice alone. Karen was always asked too, but between hard work, and sheer pressure on her time, she refused more often than she accepted. Occasionally she made time to run in and see Mrs. Gage, growing gradually more and more attached to the older woman, more and more grateful for her friendship. Otherwise, there was very little room for recreation in her life.

"I used to think I was the world's baby wonder as far as work was concerned," Louise remarked once, "but you've got me beaten. Don't you want anything else?"

Karen smiled.

Want anything else? It was just because she wanted so much out of life that she choose to work so hard. Once upon a time, work had been sweet for its own sake. Now it had become the gateway to other things, and beyond its half-opened door danced the dream of the day when she and Steven should have made enough money to marry - a day which seemed to be coming nearer at last.

And in the meantime, she was content. The clothes she had planned to buy with part of that thousand pounds . . . the fun that other girls had in their leisure hours . . . that very leisure itself . . . she was ready to forego. It was enough that Steven took her out now and again, that she could run in and see Mrs. Gage from time to time. Enough that she could manage her salary and save a shilling here and there, and buy carefully at the little shop in Victoria enough clothes to keep her from feeling dowdy in Steven's eyes. And when you set leisure against the joy of a job

which was congenial, anyhow, and held out such heavenly prospects, what did leisure matter?

Louise was eyeing her critically, in spite of the smile.

"I don't know whether you realise it, but you're looking awfully tired - and it isn't becoming..."

That touched the spot. No woman in love was ever reconciled to the thought of not looking her best. It jarred Karen temporarily out of her groove, and she threw an anxious glance at herself in the mirror.

"Do you really think that, Louise?"

"I do," Louise insisted, untouched by the anxiety in her voice, and then, relenting. "Tell you what you'd better do! Come round to the salon one of these days and have a facial. Madame won't mind. I'll fix you in when we're slack..."

"Oh, but..." Karen demurred. Louise completed the sentence for her.

"But you haven't the time? Look here, my girl, don't be a fool! That smart young man of yours isn't going to think anything more of you for working yourself into a hag for him! And after all the overtime you've put in for the firm, you can jolly well take an hour off during the day!"

Karen's hesitation was only momentary. The reference to Steven clinched the matter. And, after all, Louise was right. She could leave the new girl in charge of the office for an hour - between them they'd caught up on most of the work that needed doing, and she'd picked up most of what she needed to know. With quick resolution, she agreed.

"I'll come - as soon as you like. To-morrow, if you can arrange it. And - thank you, Louise!"

"Oh, that's nothing!" Louise murmured enigmatically. She liked Karen, of course, and was glad to do her a good turn - but it wouldn't have suited her book very well, either, if Steven had chosen to fall out of love with Kay just now! The next morning, she telephoned Karen at the office, and told her to come along at midday.

. . . . .

It was, Karen found, surprisingly restful to lie back in the luxurious chair at the beauty parlour, her hair hidden under a towel, her face surrendered to the skilful manipulation of Louise's fingers.

Cleanse. Massage. Presently, cool pads of cotton wool, wrung out in astringent lotion, lay on her tired skin. Louise lowered the head-rest of the chair a little, and told her to relax.

"That's what you need - rest," she said.

Karen stirred slightly under the pastel-coloured rug which had been tucked round her.

"I suppose so," she agreed meekly, her voice a little muffled.

"How d'you suppose women like Lucilla Sandle keep going? You've seen her - you know she must be forty if she's a day - but she doesn't look it. Or very seldom."

Karen tensed a little, under the concealing pads.

Lucilla Sandle - even Louise didn't know just how much she had seen of Lucilla Sandle, or how closely her life was linked with Lucilla at this very moment.

"She's here every day," Louise was continuing inexorably. "Of course, she's a lot older than you are. I can't turn her out looking like you, no matter how hard I try. But——"

Karen had relaxed again. When your weapons seem very blunt, very defenceless, it is good to know that you have one which your adversary cannot match. Louise chattered on, driving her moral home, drawing other instances, but Kay hardly heard her. She was hugging to her heart the knowledge that she had at least in youth something which Lucilla could never recapture.

And so comforting did she find that knowledge that Louise herself was surprised and pleased when, the treatment over, she gave her a skilful make-up.

"I thought I'd need rouge for you, but I don't," she commented, her head on one side, her trained eyes surveying Karen critically. "Shows it was only tiredness. Look

here, Kay, will you do this once a week if I can fix it? Have a look at yourself in the glass."

Karen looked - and that was all it took to make her fall in gratefully with Louise's suggestion. She realised suddenly that her tired, drawn face had been robbing her happy eyes of half their brightness. Glowing, she thanked Louise again, and hurried back to the office, wondering if Steven would notice. . . .

He was out when she got there. Slipping out of coat and hat, she settled down to work. He tore in presently, and looked round the door of the small room where she and the other girl worked.

"I want you a moment, Miss Winter."

Heart beating, she followed him into his office. Stood, breathless, while he closed the door carefully behind her. . . . Would he notice. . . .

He threw something on to the desk before her.

"Read that!" he said exultantly. Bewildered, she began to read. . . .

A mass of legal phraseology . . . she was ploughing through it, when he laid his hands over hers as they held the document.

"You needn't bother, Kay! I'll tell you what that is. You know that big showroom we liked in Piccadilly the other day? I've taken it."

Karen gasped, her head whirling. Stared at him, eyes wide and fearful.

"Wasn't it a piece of luck? I heard a rumour that it was coming on the market——"

"But——"

"And it's just the place we need! Think of a couple of Rolls and maybe an Isotta behind those huge windows. . . ."

"But, Steven," she broke in frantically, "what's the rent?"

"Five thousand a year, with rates," he told her gaily. Her heart sank. Had he gone quite crazy? It was taking them all their time to pay seven hundred and fifty for their



present place. He kept her on tenterhooks a moment or two longer before he exploded his second bomb.

"We should worry! Lucilla Sandle's coming into this firm - and bringing ten thousand pounds as a start - as a start only, mind you, Kay!"

She felt a wave of complete and utter depression sweep over her.

## CHAPTER XXV

MRS. GAGE SAID GENTLY :

" You're looking very tired, Karen. And white. Are you quite sure you're not overdoing things? "

She said something of the sort nearly every time she saw Kay. And usually Kay laughed, and assured her that she was all right really - really not working too hard. To-night, for the first time, she hesitated.

" Oh, no . . . " she said at last, almost mechanically. " At least, I'm tired. But I shall be all right after a good night's sleep. "

(Was it only a few hours ago that her radiant, refreshed face had looked back at her out of a mirror? A clever beauty specialist may cope with weariness, but sheer unhappiness is something beyond her powers.)

" You know, " Mrs. Gage said bluntly, " I wish you'd never left Bamfields. I know enough of business to realise that it must be much harder work " - she hesitated, and went on tactfully - " building up a new concern, than working for an old-established one. " She glanced at her watch as she spoke. Added firmly :

" Listen, my dear, I've got to go out for half an hour or so. I promised to look in to see a neighbour of ours - an old lady, who is sometimes lonely. But she won't keep me very long. And while I'm gone, I want you to stretch out on the couch there with a book. When I come back, we'll be thoroughly feminine and have a cup of tea. "

Karen tried to protest, but the older woman settled her down, in a motherly way there was no resisting, tucked a cushion behind her head, and a rug over her knees ; fetched

a couple of illustrated weeklies, and a new novel ; set a box of cigarettes at her elbow, and nodded serenely.

" I know what you'll do if you go home ! Rush round washing dishes or stockings, or doing housework. It'll all keep. Take it easy for a little while, and you'll be surprised how rested you are by the time I get back ! "

She was gone with a little wave of her hand. Out of sheer gratitude for her kindly thought, Karen picked up one of the weeklies, and tried to read it, but her heart was so heavy that she could not concentrate. Eventually, she gave up the attempt, laid the magazine down, and lay back, staring straight in front of her. Angry to find that tears were creeping to her eyes. Weary enough to let them stay there . . . they would be gone, long before Mrs. Gage returned.

Something like desperation had driven her in this direction when she left the office. The feeling that somehow, anyhow, she must get away from herself ; a dread of being alone. It was one of Louise's class nights, and the mere thought of the empty flat made Karen's heart sink.

Presently, of course, when she was rested a little, she would be able to get herself in hand again. Master her quivering nerves, her unsteady heart. Mrs. Gage's warm welcome had done a great deal to help. She could think, now, lying quietly, breathing slowly, looking back incredulously on the most horrible afternoon of her life.

*She had quarrelled with Steven. . . .*

She had been too numbed, after he made his announcement about Lucilla Sandle, to say anything at first. She had stood silent, her hands passive in his, her brain trying vainly to work, while he waited, eagerly, for her comments. Then, when she got beyond mere thinking and feeling, when thoughts began to move again in her mind, she had pulled her hands slowly away from his. Not looking at him, so that he tried in vain to read her expression. He'd said at last:

" Well - what's the matter ? Aren't you pleased ? "

And she had said, unable to make more of it - simply :

"No."

She had turned to look at him then, and he had seen the shock, the disappointment, written in her eyes. He'd looked startled.

"Great Scott, Kay——"

"You might have let me know. . . ."

And he, obviously impatient of the unreasonableness of women, obviously trying to humour her, had said,

"I didn't like to! It seemed such a long shot. I hardly dared to think that I'd bring it off, and I thought you'd be as disappointed as I'd have been if I didn't."

She asked, her voice muffled:

"But why? Just when we were beginning to do so well here?"

Steven shrugged petulant shoulders.

"Isn't that every reason for wanting to do better? I thought you agreed that we ought to have a better place——"

She had, of course. But she'd never thought of getting it this way. She'd had a vague, shadowy picture, at the back of her mind, of the pair of them working away together, building up small profits, turning them steadily into larger and larger ones. And one day, there would have been enough margin of safety for them to get married. And they'd have gone on working together, until the ground beneath their feet was solid and unshakable. And then they'd have looked round for a big place, and moved into it. Building up, all the time – and just the two of them.

She couldn't put all that into words. Not as she was feeling now – she'd have been in tears before she had ended. So she said instead, reluctantly:

"Yes, but——"

"Well – what's the 'but' for? Isn't it better to do it now, and get going at once, than to wait years? We'd probably never have got anything again so good as the Piccadilly place. When I heard it was going, it made my mouth water, and I determined to have a shot at Lucilla. So after we had

lunch to-day, I wangled it so that we strolled past. . . ."

Karen could imagine it so clearly. Steven saying, "That's the place I'd like to have, of course, if I could afford it." And Lucilla. . . . It was for all the world like a child who passes a toyshop window, and throws out hints . . . the disloyalty of the thought had brought her up with a jerk.

She said, trying to be reasonable, logical :

"But - isn't it an awful gamble?"

"Good heavens, everything's a gamble in this life! You never get anywhere if you don't take risks——"

He had broken off, and looked at her curiously. And then burst out, resentfully:

"What the devil's the matter with you, Kay? I've never known you behave like this before——" (But she'd never questioned anything that he did, before, had she?) "You're not" - with a flash of insight - "idiot enough to be jealous of Lucilla Sandle, are you?"

"I'm not jealous of her," she had said, white-lipped, "but I think you might have let me know——"

He had flared up at that.

"I've told you once—I thought you'd be as disappointed as I'd have been——"

"I wouldn't! I'd have tried to persuade you not to do it. I think it's crazy——"

"You think! Putting a thousand pounds in the firm doesn't entitle you to dictate——"

Looking back, it was incredible that they had ever said those things to one another. Those hateful, abominable things. Until, with sudden realisation that their voices were rising, Steven had reached for his hat and the lease of the new premises and marched to the door.

"If that's how you feel, we won't discuss it any longer. It's an accomplished fact, and the sooner you reconcile yourself to it, the better, Kay!"

He'd gone off, leaving her white and shaken, to struggle with her self-control for a matter of minutes before she went back to the other office and the curious eyes of the new girl.



For the rest of the afternoon, she had worked blindly, hardly knowing what she was doing. Waiting only to hear Steven come in again. And he hadn't come back.

They had closed up at six, in the usual way, and she had gone on working — she did it so often, that it raised no curious speculations in the new girl's mind. Until, at last, at half past seven, she had come to the conclusion that Steven wouldn't return that night. Probably, she thought bitterly, he was having dinner with Lucilla Sandle, and they were making plans together. . . .

So she had come round to Mrs. Gage's flat, hoping against hope that Barry wouldn't be there, and he wasn't. And the two women had had dinner together, and Mrs. Gage had said nothing of the disturbance she could see in the girl's eyes. And now she had slipped away, making her tactful excuse.

Karen's mind was becoming calmer, and the tears had gone from her eyes, but her heart still ached.

Steven had been right, of course. She was jealous of Lucilla Sandle. But not in the way he thought. She *knew* that Lucilla didn't matter to him in that way. But she hated Lucilla because she could do so much for him that she would have given the heart out of her breast to be able to do.

Facing up to that fact, she took herself to task.

She had been unreasonable. Unappreciative. She ought to have understood how much it all mattered to Steven. What a difference it would make to him to be master of a large establishment, instead of an unassuming little place in a back street. And if, for a moment, the added responsibilities that were being heaped on the firm had frightened her — hadn't that been cowardly? Of course Steven could cope with it all. She'd been silly to doubt it.

No wonder he had been angry with her.

She thought, to-morrow I'll apologise. Tell him how sorry I am. She had a vague recollection of saying something about . . . if he felt like that, perhaps he'd like to get rid of her, altogether. Suppose . . . suppose he had taken her at

her word? But he'd know, now at any rate, that she hadn't meant it. And to-morrow, she'd put everything right again.

A little comforted, she lay back against the cushion, and put out her hand for the magazine. Set it down again as she heard a key turn in the front door. This would be Mrs. Gage coming back, and she'd be able to tell her, truthfully, how rested she felt.

But the steps that came through the hall weren't Mrs. Gage's, and it was Barry who thrust open the door and walked in, stopping short when he saw her lying there on the sofa. A little glint of alarm showed in his eyes.

"Hullo! Nothing wrong . . .?"

"Nothing at all!" She shook her head, smiling. A little colour had come back to the pale cheeks which had so worried his mother. "Your mother thought I looked tired, and tucked me up here while she went to visit a neighbour."

He nodded, satisfied.

"That would be old Mrs. Johnstone. Well, are you feeling better - or shall I tiptoe gently out of the picture?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"I'm very much better - no, don't go. I haven't seen you for ages - incidentally, I hear you're to be congratulated——"

"Congratulated?" He looked startled for a moment, and then laughed. "Oh, you mean about the job? Yes, I suppose I ought to be pleased. I'd waited long enough. I think the Old Man realised that, for he slipped me a few shares in the company at the same time."

He couldn't resist telling her that, but he felt a trifle ashamed, a trifle regretful, the moment the words were out of his mouth. Of course, she'd think of the way the Old Man treated Hallett. But Karen took it gallantly enough.

"I suppose he's learnt a lesson!" she said. "Doesn't want to lose another good man. . . ."

"I suppose not," Barry agreed, lamely.

He stood, leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece, looking down at her. Although her cheeks were faintly pink again,

she looked very small and fragile, tucked up on the big couch, her red-gold head nestled into the dark cushion. He thought of her as he had usually seen her – rattling away on a typewriter, scurrying round the office, speaking crisply into a telephone. Thought, with a familiar touch of anger, as he had so often thought, it isn't a life for a girl like Kay. . . . If only she'd let me take care of her. . . .

Never dreaming the sort of thing that was running round in his mind, she stretched out her arms, gave a faint, restless sigh.

"I'm so comfortable, Barry! Your mother simply spoils me. . . ."

It was more than he could stand. He took a step forward, towards her. Said, in a husky, uneven voice:

"You ought to be spoilt, Kay! I wish——"

Sitting down on the edge of the couch, before she could move, he had covered her two hands with his.

"Kay – I know I promised I wouldn't bother you again, but – isn't there any chance of your changing your mind? It would make me – so terribly happy, if you'd only let me take care of you! You know" – he hesitated, and then went on – "it wouldn't mean the sort of life Molly leads – I know you'd hate that. I could give you comfort——"

He wasn't angry, as he had been that night at the flat. Not passionate. He was very gentle. Looking at him, Kay understood suddenly that he really cared for her. Funny, she'd never somehow realised that before. Not understood it properly. It didn't occur to her that her own love for Steven had brought her to a clearer understanding of what went on in other people's hearts. She was aware of an intense reluctance to hurt him, knowing now how desperately she could hurt him. She said, very gently, leaving her hands in his clasp:

"I wish I could care for you, Barry. . . ."

"You might, one day. . . ."

Almost unconsciously, she shook her head.

"Not – like that——"

"I see." He let her hands go, and stood erect again. "There's someone else."

It seemed - silly - to keep things a secret from Barry. You could trust him so utterly. And he had almost a right to know. Wouldn't it make it easier for him to forget her, if he knew there wasn't any hope? She said, in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper:

"Yes. I think you know. It's Steven, of course."

He turned away at that. He didn't want her to see his eyes, the anger in them, blotting out even his own hurt. If it had been a decent fellow, he could have borne it, but that tricky, smart-alec Hallett. . . .

It took him a moment or two to master his features. Not till he knew that his eyes were expressionless again, that the tenseness of his jaw had relaxed, did he turn round. Then he said:

"I'm sorry. I think I've cared for you, Kay, ever since I first banged into you with that swing-door. I think I'll go on caring for you for ever. Enough to hope that you'll always be - very happy. . . ."

She felt an odd, unaccustomed lump in her throat. Felt the tears stinging her eyes. Said, rather chokily:

"Thank you, Barry. . . ."

Felt a wholly unnecessary rush of gratitude towards Mrs. Gage for unconsciously choosing that moment to return.

## CHAPTER XXVI

LUCILLA SANDLE said, her voice carrying clearly, automatically, through the huge showroom :

"That's the car you ought to have ! A really comfortable body, and a distinctive colour scheme - I settled all the details myself, so I ought to know !"

A mouse-like little woman in dowdy but very "good" clothes stepped timidly in to try the seating. Her stout husband grinned.

"That's all very well, Mrs. Sandle ! But what's the price ?"

"A mere nothing - to you !" she flashed, giving him the full benefit of one of her most seductive smiles. And then, raising her voice a little : "Oh - Miss Winter ! You might tell me just what the price of this car comes out at——"

Hating Lucilla with every fibre of her being, Karen quickly found the specification. Walked across the showroom with it, and handed it over, her face courteously expressionless.

"Thank you. . . ." Perfunctory words. A perfunctory nod of the head, and Karen was dismissed, to walk noiselessly back to her desk at the rear of the showroom. Once there, she bent her head again over the book on which she was working ; pencil in hand, she ran up the column of figures . . . once, twice, three times. And did not once see the figures under her eyes.

Even though Lucilla only came along for one or two hours in the week, to play with her new toy, it was almost more than Karen could stand. She had said angrily, once, to Steven :



"You'd think she owned the place!"

And he, laughing, had shrugged his shoulders.

"She owns a good bit of it, my sweet! We shouldn't be here to-day" - his satisfied glance swept the huge show-room, with its ranks of cars, its enormous mirrors, its soft carpeting, and general air of luxury - "if it weren't for Lucilla. And besides, she only comes along when she brings a customer! I know you hate her - but you don't hate the business she brings in!"

That was true enough. Lucilla had not only made it possible for them to move - the sales which she engineered among her own friends and acquaintances were paying the rent. Facing facts, Karen thought with a shudder of the immense liabilities which the firm had taken on. They would have been even more of a nightmare, without Lucilla Sandle's continued interest.

"No - I don't. But, Steven" - her voice had been urgent, anxious - "suppose she gets tired of it all? She won't go on doing it for ever. Suppose she suddenly lost interest?"

He had laughed again, but a little impatiently.

"My dear Kay, you don't think I've overlooked that? Of course she'll get tired of it all - one day! It's our business to see that the day is put off as long as possible. By the time she does decide to find some new toy to amuse her, we should be running under our own steam. But just for the moment we need her - that's why she's got to be humoured."

It was all very well, Kay thought resentfully, for Steven to talk of humouring Lucilla Sandle. It wasn't so hard for him. Lucilla invariably went out of her way to be charming to Steven, listened to him with attention, swept him off to lunches and dinners, flattered him and teased him by turns. Steven, of course, was a man.

But Karen. . .

Lucilla was very pointedly kind to Karen, when Steven was about, and if there was more than a hint of patronage

in her kindness, Steven had failed to take notice of it. But Lucilla's attitude made it quite clear that to her Karen was something of an upper servant—a creature from another sphere. One who existed to run about for her and for Steven Hallett.

It's not, Karen thought resentfully, her heart swelling, as she sat still, apparently engrossed in her book, as if I didn't take all the responsibility when Steven's not here. As if he didn't want me to, expect me to. If I were only his typist, I wouldn't mind her behaving like that. . . .

It was difficult enough, as it was, to do all that Steven wanted her to. To maintain a position of authority, over the greatly increased staff, some of whom resented her covertly. But it was ten times more difficult to do it, when Lucilla Sandle's manner was what it was. She was, Karen thought bitterly, a great deal more polite and charming to the junior salesman—a raw cub from Oxford—than to herself.

She looked up, scowling unconsciously. And then her brow smoothed, as Lucilla sailed up with the couple in tow.

"We want an order-form, Miss Winter."

Lucilla was glowing with triumph. Karen said, with quiet civility, touching a bell on her desk:

"I'll have one of the typists come and get it out for you immediately."

She was secretly pleased to see the slight air of surprise that crossed Lucilla's face. She needn't think, Karen reflected viciously, that I'm going to do the thing for her. . . .

If it had been Steven, of course, that would have been different. She'd have taken the details, run upstairs to the office, and typed it out herself. But not for Lucilla. It gave her a considerable amount of inward satisfaction that the other woman had to turn to her for a great deal of information.

What a poor, petty satisfaction! She reproached herself ashamedly afterwards. What a rotten sport she was becoming, that she could behave so childishly. Could forget,

in her personal pique and hurt, that only one thing mattered – the welfare of Hallett Car Sales Ltd.

She seemed to have forgotten, these days, the end to which she and Steven were working. It didn't seem possible, any more, that he and she would really get married, when things were more prosperous.

Of course, she told herself, with a little flicker of panic, they would! Just because Steven hadn't said anything about it lately. . . . She was horrified to find herself quivering all over, and rising hastily to her feet, she slipped out of the showroom. She'd wash, and renew her make-up. She'd feel better after that.

She was glad to find herself alone in the cloakroom. It was a relief to splash her face with the cold water. Soothing to smooth the powder foundation over her hot cheeks, her tired forehead. Steadying to the nerves to wield powder-puff and lipstick. That finished, she considered herself gravely in the glass. She looked older, somehow.

Not because she was tired and drawn, but rather because of a new look in her eyes. A more serious look. Something of the sparkle and animation had gone out of them; they were steadier, more experienced looking.

The riot of curls was smoothed to the back of her head, nowadays, in an effort to achieve dignity, and she paid more attention to her clothes. Seated at that desk in the showroom, dealing with customers and the staff with authority, she needed every possible support for that authority which she could achieve. The responsibility on her shoulders sometimes frightened her these days – as she had thought that responsibility never could frighten her. Steven had kept his word, and kept it very liberally. It never occurred to Karen that he had done it quite carelessly, because it made life easier for him.

When he was not there, she was virtually manager of the business. Her signature went on the cheques. It was she who said whether an order should or should not be taken, whether a typist might or might not have the

afternoon off, whether a car might or might not be bought.

Feeling a little rested and refreshed, she told herself valiantly that was as she had wanted things. As she had never hoped they might be. That it was foolish and inconsistent to worry about it, now that she had achieved her ambition. Her head was a little higher as she went downstairs again, and back to her desk.

She was like that, these days. Moody. A prey to unhappiness and anxiety one moment. Full of courage and hope the next. She thought vaguely: I'll have to take a tonic, or something. . . .

She wasn't so often late these days. The increased staff kept the work moving. Increased business made more systematic working possible.

It was so *darned* unreasonable to look back at the old days, in the little showroom, with this absurd longing. Those crazy days, when she'd worked twelve or fourteen hours a day, when she and Steven had held anxious conferences each evening. . . .

Crazy - but they'd been sweet. They had been so near together, she and Steven, then.

The salesmen were drifting out of the showroom. Six o'clock had struck out from the neighbouring church, and they had wives to go home to, girls to take out. The cashier, ready dressed for the street, brought her the keys of the safe. The commissionaire was waiting to lock up. Coming to the present with a jerk, she rose from her desk, just as Steven came striding in.

"All right, Hopkins, I'll lock up. You can go."

The man saluted and went. Karen looked up with a smile.

"How's everything?"

"Quite good." She recited the events of the day - he'd been out since eleven that morning - thinking, with the old familiar thrill, how handsome he was, how tall and well-made. Telling herself with a fierce pride that he was, after all, hers. . . .

"O.K.," he agreed, content. "You know, Kay, you can run this place perfectly well without me. I never bother, so long as you're in charge——"

His dark eyes were on her face rather intently, as he spoke, but she did not notice it. She flushed, a little, gratefully. This made it all so much easier, so much more worth while.

"In fact," he continued, "I don't think you'd miss me much if I went away for a week, would you?"

Her glance flashed to his face with sudden alarm.

"Of course I should! Why, Steven, you're not ill, or anything, are you?"

"No," he said easily, "I was just thinking of taking a sort of holiday, that's all."

Her heart sank at the thought. She said steadily:

"I suppose I could manage. And it might be good for you. . . ."

"It might be good for the business, too," he said, his eyes still on her face. "It's a sort of combination of business and pleasure that I have in mind — mainly business. You don't think I'd run away and leave you alone for any other reason?"

For all his lightness of tone, he seemed vaguely uneasy, and her heart grew heavier still as she noticed it. Something was in the wind, but what? Her doubts received quick confirmation when he went on, not looking at her now, but looking across the empty showroom, at the ranks of gleaming cars.

"You see, Lucilla Sandle's off to the South of France at the end of the week and she wants me to go along — she knows such heaps of wealthy people — she's sure we can do a lot of business there——"

So Lucilla Sandle was at the bottom of it again!

Karen said slowly, resentment surging in her breast:

"Why should you have to go? Lucilla's quite a good hand at doing business on her own — she brought in some customers to-day——"



"I know! She told me," Hallett broke in eagerly, "she got the order, but she had to get all the details from you. She couldn't have brought it off without someone who knows the ropes to help her."

Karen's anger was rising. She said briefly, curtly, in a tone she had never used to him before:

"I think it's nonsense, Steven! You can't be away from the business, and if Lucilla can land the customers they'll have to get the cars here; we can settle the details this end. It's just because she wants you to go gadding round with her. She's never happy unless she's got some man or other in tow, and for the time being, you're the nearest man——"

She had spoken almost without thinking, never reckoning on the effect of her words, never dreaming that they would prick his vanity. He looked sullen and resentful, but she hardly noticed it.

"After all," she said impatiently, "she's a shareholder! She ought to know that a business can't run if the head is away——"

He said, sinking his own pique in an effort to cajole her:

"But, my dear girl, the trouble is that she knows you'll be here, and I've told her so often that you're perfectly capable of running the show. After that, I can't persuade her that I mustn't be away for so short a time——"

His mind flashed back to Lucilla, half coaxing, half imperious. . . . "But of course you can come, Steven! You can leave that girl of yours in charge! I promise you, you'll do lots of business—and besides—I want you to come!"

Karen was silent. He said again, his tone changing to one of appeal:

"I don't want to go, heaven knows, Kay! But it's still terribly important for us to keep on the right side of Lucilla. And she's made such a point of my going, and, after all, it's only for a week——"

Drearily, in her heart of hearts, Karen was facing up to

the fact that he meant to go, whatever she said. That he'd probably settled everything already with Mrs. Sandle, and that nothing she could say or do could stop him. She hunched her shoulders.

"Oh, all right. I suppose I can manage——"

"Of course you can!" Relief lent his voice emphasis. He took a step nearer, and heedless of the fact that any curious passer-by could stare through the wide windows, tried to take hold of her hand. "You know I hate leaving you, Kay, don't you?"

She was silent. Refused to look at him. Moved away slightly. A faint crease appeared between his brows.

"Listen," he urged suddenly, "I'm supposed to be having dinner with Lucilla, but she can't have everything her own way. Suppose I cut it, and you and I go out to a roadhouse somewhere in the country, for dinner, and dance——"

Just for a moment the old, familiar thrill lifted Karen's heart. The thought of the long drive, through the gathering dusk, at Steven's side . . . of dining with him at some country place . . . of dancing . . . of driving back through the night . . . all this for a moment quickened her pulses. But the thrill died. She shook her head wearily.

"Better not, Steven. You said only a moment ago how important it was to keep on the right side of Mrs. Sandle."

He's more Lucilla's than mine, these days, she thought with a dim resentment.

He was no longer trying to take her hand. But he had come very close to her and was looking down at her, his dark eyes very persuasive.

"Hang Lucilla!" he said in a low voice, "say you'll come, Kay!"

She looked up, and he smiled. That conquering smile of his. She was almost as surprised as he when she found herself shaking her head. Saying quietly, but quite firmly:

"No, Steven. Better not. Besides, I don't think I want to. I'm very tired."

## CHAPTER XXVII

"LOOK HERE, KAY," Barry Gage said suddenly, "you're looking rather blue. What's the matter?"

Karen realised with a little shock that she must have been sitting silent, staring into the fire, for a matter of minutes. She roused herself. Smiled at him and shook her head.

"Nothing much. Sorry."

They were sitting in his den at his mother's flat. Since Steven had gone abroad, Karen had spent more and more of her time with Mrs. Gage, and to-night she had been invited to a small dinner party. Now, after dinner, the other four had constituted an enthusiastic bridge table. Kay, too busy to be a really polished bridge player, had begged off cutting in, and Barry had carried her off.

The room was, she had thought, restful—like Barry himself. Heavy leather chairs, lots of books, a few sporting prints on the walls, a number of pipes in various stages of decrepitude on the mantelpiece. A casual, comfortable atmosphere that encouraged you to relax, to let down your guard. . . . But she hadn't realised that in her worry and weariness she had betrayed herself so far.

He said, almost idly:

"Don't tell tarradiddles! Tell me to mind my own business, if you must, but——"

She laughed a little, the laughter lightening the heaviness of her depression.

"It isn't anything much, really, Barry. I'll find a way out of it, but I'm a bit bothered, and I haven't anyone to go to for advice——"

He raised an eyebrow, his keen, kindly eyes on her face.

"Business?"

She nodded.

"When's Hallett due back?"

The depression fell on her again, though she tried to disguise the fact.

"Oh, I don't know. He seems - to be very busy——"

She didn't miss the sceptical glint that flickered in the man's eyes, and out of loyalty to Steven she added hastily: "He's doing business, you know. He's sent three orders over——"

Barry was silent for a moment. Then:

"If it's business, I suppose you don't want to tell me about it. But I'm quite safe, really, Kay. If I could help, won't you let me?"

Karen hesitated. It was business and, that being the case, it oughtn't, of course, to be discussed with Barry Gage, who was Sales Manager of Bamfields. But Barry Gage was also her friend and she knew she could trust him. Making up her mind, she said with a little rush:

"It's the bank . . . we've got an overdraft, you know - Lucilla Sandle put in a lot of money, but most of it went on the move, and advertising and that sort of thing. We're perfectly solvent, and all that, but the old manager's gone, and the new one's fussing. He can't understand why we must keep so much in stock. I think" - her pride flinched, but she went on valiantly - "I think the real trouble is that Steven's been away so long - it's nearly a month, you know, and the man can't believe that a woman's capable of running the business."

It hurt to bring that out, and yet she knew it was the root of the whole trouble. The old bank manager had had time to get used to her, but to the new one it seemed all wrong that she should be in charge of a motor business. If it had been hats - or cosmetics - or lingerie - he could have understood and approved. But when this slip of a girl's signature appeared on cheques for large amounts,

when she called, in response to his request for someone to discuss that wretched overdraft . . . she had seen the doubt and disapproval leap to his eyes.

Barry said, staunchly, sincerely :

"The man's a fool. He ought to know an honest woman when he sees one."

He ought to prefer dealing with you to dealing with Hallett, if he knew his job! was his inward thought. Karen smiled gratefully.

"Thank you, Barry. It isn't serious, of course, and of course it'll be all right when Steven gets back again. But I can't help worrying. Every time I draw a cheque I wonder if he's going to get windy and stop it."

And then, unconsciously telling Barry a whole lot he had guessed already, she said, with a little sigh:

"It wouldn't be so bad, if things were easier in other ways."

Barry scowled into the fire. He knew pretty well how difficult things had been for her. Even the men on the staff, resentful of her authority, tried to ignore it and flout it. Many people in the trade knew her by now and respected her ability, but there were others who found something absurd in dealing with a woman, and made no secret of the fact. And, of course . . .

His eyes darkened. That wasn't the worst of it for her. His smouldering hatred of Steven Hallett all but flamed. The man was a swine to go gallivanting over the Riviera with Lucilla Sandle, leaving Karen alone for so long, with the weight of his damned business on her shoulders.

He turned to look at her, and the tenseness of his mouth relaxed. She looked so slight, so fragile, lying back in the great chair, her red-gold hair lit by the dancing light of the fire, her green evening dress making her slimmer than ever in the chair's capacious embrace. He glanced tenderly at the valiant grey eyes, the soft, determined little mouth . . . the droop at its corners stirred him unbelievably, and he spoke quickly, roughly, almost without thinking.



"Look here, Kay, next time you have a word with that bank manager fellow, you can refer him to me. Officially. At Bamfields. If he asks me what I think of you——"

She sat up, staring at him with incredulous eyes.

"Barry! You wouldn't! I mean——"

He knew well enough what she meant. Knew well enough, too, what old Bamfield would have said. . . . He set his jaw recklessly.

"Why shouldn't I? *We*"—there was an emphasis, a challenging emphasis on the word—"don't go round blackguarding competitors. And if Bamfields say you're O.K. I imagine that's good enough."

He stood up suddenly, as if the mere inactivity of sitting still irked him. Stood smiling down at her, his wise, kind, friendly smile. She said thankfully, with a little sob:

"Oh, Barry——"

Well, he thought, angrily, I'd cheerfully chop off my right hand for her, wouldn't I? Devil take old Bamfield, if he hears and objects!

He was still in entirely the same frame of mind when he learned that old Bamfield had heard.

It hurt, rather, that the Old Man should survey him with such puzzled eyes. He'd suffered a bitter disappointment at old Bamfield's hands once, but the amends had been generously made, and he didn't like to think that the Old Man felt let down.

"I don't understand," he said, peering curiously at his young Sales Manager over the top of his glasses. "You know what I think of Hallett. I thought you shared my opinion. And yet—did you really boost his stock to the bank, young man?"

"No, sir. At least——" Barry hesitated. And then said honestly: "I suppose it was Hallett's stock in a way. But—it wasn't Hallett. I told the bank that they could have every confidence in Miss Winter, that's all."

Bamfield frowned.

"That's the girl wonder I sacked when Hallett left?"

"Yes, sir. Hallett's been abroad for weeks, and — things are a bit hard for her. I — was afraid you mightn't approve, but I didn't see any real harm in — I mean to say, she's doing a man's job——"

Bamfield frowned, almost automatically. But his shrewd eyes were still on Barry.

"I take it," he said, "that you're — interested in the young woman?"

"I'd marry her to-morrow if she'd have me!" Barry told him straight.

"Then," sputtered the Old Man suddenly, "you're a fool, young man! A fool! You youngsters have no idea how to handle a woman. Doing a man's job, indeed — a pretty thing! And you've got to bolster her up in it! Don't approve of women in business, Gage!"

"I don't think I do myself, sir!" Barry agreed, his heart a trifle lighter. "Not this one, anyhow!"

"That's where you're a fool! Don't you see — the harder things are for her, the less she'll think of being a business woman? Let her get right up against it, young fellow, and she'll have you all right——"

There was kindly scorn in the shrewd eyes. He'd a soft spot for young Gage, had old Bamfield. He'd regretted bitterly his own bedazzlement with Hallett's showy gifts, and the way it had led him to pass Gage over. He'd tried to make it up to him — he'd do more for him yet, in his own good time. And nothing would have pleased him better than to see young Gage settled down, with a nice wife . . . he'd have forked out a handsome wedding present, and given him a still more generous deal. . . .

"Unfortunately" — Barry's voice was a little stiff, and his shoulders had straightened unconsciously — "she doesn't want me — anyhow——"

Bamfield's quick brain followed the path that Molly's had taken many weeks before.

She didn't mind leaving, the chit. She went with Hallett. So Hallett got Gage's job, and then he got Gage's girl. . . .

Things, she thought drearily, closing her eyes and letting Louise's skilled hands ease their weariness, seemed to have gone so far adrift, from those first heavenly days. Maybe it was because she had quarrelled with Steven anyhow, about this trip abroad.

She remembered, with a little feeling of chill, his surprise and pique that last evening when she had refused to go out with him. Hadn't she been a fool, after all? Wouldn't it have been better to go? She mightn't have felt then, as she did now, this vague unrest, this nagging uncertainty. The touch of his hands, the eagerness of his mouth on hers, would have charmed it all away, would have left her safely bound in the old enchantment. She'd known that at the time, and yet she hadn't wanted to go.

Jealousy of Lucilla? Maybe it was. And yet, if she were going to be jealous of Lucilla, wasn't she already fighting a losing battle?

Louise was whisking the cream from her face with a soft tissue. Reached for a generous pad of cotton wool and a bottle of face tonic.

"Saw Barry Gage in Piccadilly to-day," she said, changing the subject. "He's asked me to go to a show with him to-morrow night."

"You going? I thought you'd a date with Philip. . . ."

"Oh, him!" Louise shrugged her shoulders. "He'll just have to take me to the pictures some other time, that's all."

The cool liquid refreshed Karen's tired face. She was thankful her eyes were closed. For it had suddenly occurred to her that although she and Barry were still good friends, he'd given up asking her to go out when he took Louise. That was her own fault, of course - she'd refused so often - and she saw him at the flat, of course, but . . .

Louise was wringing out two cotton-wool pads.

"I'll leave you with these on your eyes for a bit," she said. "You lie quiet and relax - if you know what the word means. I'm going to put the kettle on, and when it boils we'll have some tea."

Expertly, mechanically, she threw the eiderdown over Kay and tucked it in comfortably. Turned and left her, alone with thoughts, which travelled inevitably to Steven.

In spite of what she'd said to Louise, Steven wasn't doing much business now. He sent home some names every time he wrote - names to be entered on a mailing list, and given his attention when he returned. But after the one or two orders he had pulled off at the beginning of his trip, there had been a long gap. Maybe, as he wrote airily, he was putting in good propaganda work - but he should have realised that they couldn't afford, just now, to spend their time on propaganda. And he might have stopped to think that life wasn't too easy for her without him.

She'd been hinting at it for some time now, in her letters to him. She'd said it outright, last time she wrote, and begged him to come home. There hadn't been any answer to that yet, though she'd reckoned the letter must have reached him.

Karen moved uneasily. Thanks to Louise's ministrations she was feeling less tired than she'd done an hour ago. The soothing pads on her eyes were taking away the stinging sense of weariness. Yet, even relaxed as she was, she ached all over. She said aloud, with a sudden sense of rebellion:

"Gosh, but I'm tired!"

And Louise, coming in with the tray in her hands, caught the words.

"Of course you are!" she said briskly. "I know you hate admitting it, Kay, but the job you're trying to do is too much for you. If you've got any sense at all, you'll throw your hand in when Steven comes home. Tell him you're sick of a business life, and you'd rather marry him and settle down to domesticity - whatever his version of that may be."

Marry, and settle down. . . .

Forget all about the office. Stop worrying about prospective customers, and the value of second-hand cars, and the rest of it all. Relax her mind, as completely as she had just



relaxed her body. Get free of that feeling of tenseness which was always with her. Karen was horrified to realise how tempting the prospect was. She thought, I wonder. . . .

What was the use of wondering? Steven — he'd said it so often, and she knew in her heart of hearts it was true — couldn't manage without her. It wasn't simply her own conceit, telling her that she was indispensable. It was her knowledge of him. He needed her, there in the office.

Lord, what a crazy world. Once that knowledge had set her heart to pounding with exultation. How could the thought of it send a wave of depression over her now? But it did.

Louise lifted the pads from her eyes.

"You look better. I've made the tea strong — it won't keep you awake, will it?"

"No. It's lovely, being waited on like this. I sometimes think you spoil me as much as Molly did."

Louise nodded serenely.

"That's what I've just been telling you. You need spoiling! Take my advice, marry that man of yours just as soon as he gets back, and let him take the job on. He ought to be a far better hand at it than I am. . . ."

Though she was busy with the tray, pouring out her own cup of tea, the tall blonde girl's eyes were studying Karen covertly. The sooner Karen married, the better, she was thinking. Better for Karen, of course . . . and, of course, it might suit her own book, too.

"I don't know . . . perhaps. . . ." Karen said absent-mindedly. And then, rousing herself, smiled across at Louise.

"You're right about one thing," she agreed. "It's time he came back——"

Because, of course, when he was near her again, life would be easier. And, still more important, his presence would sweep away these doubts, these uncertainties, which had begun to creep into her mind since he had been away. She added loyally:



"I'm sure he'd have been back long ago, if he hadn't had to keep on the Sandle woman's right side. . . . It must be awful for him, having to dance attendance on her all the time."

Jealous of Lucilla? After all the rude things Steven had said about her? She must, Karen told herself firmly, have been quite crazy.

Meanwhile, nearly a thousand miles away, Steven was dancing attendance on Lucilla Sandle.

They sat in one of the greatest, gayest, most exclusive Riviera hotels, dinner over, and coffee and liqueurs on the table between them. Steven absurdly handsome in his immaculate evening kit. Lucilla at her most glamorous under the artificial light, in a gown that became her amazingly, making the best of her really opulent curves, setting off the unmistakable beauty of her jewellery. The diamonds on her fingers alone, Steven thought swiftly, would have kept him in luxury for a year.

They had been drinking champagne, and they were both very gay, both a trifle excited with life and its varying possibilities. Lucilla said suddenly, studying him from under her heavy lashes.

"Well - you don't regret taking my advice and coming over?"

"Of course I don't! Don't be absurd, Lucilla."

She reached out a hand and shook the ash from her cigarette. Her nails were painted a vivid red, studded with tiny *diamanté* flecks, and she considered her hand for a curious moment. A new fad . . . it would be dead to-morrow, or making its appearance on hands less costly, less well tended than hers. But for the moment, it was amusing. They'd stung her a lot, at that French beauty salon, for its use, but it was worth while. Your whims were always worth paying for, Lucilla thought. When you have plenty of money, you can afford to indulge in whims. Even - expensive ones.

"You've sold some cars," she said, "and we've had a good time, haven't we?"

Steven's alert mind seized on the words. We've had a good time . . . did that mean that the good time was over?

For some time now he had begun to realise that he had made the best of the ostensible reason for the trip. He'd secured all the customers that he could hope to secure, and there was really no excuse for his staying on. He could have gone back to London a week ago – and he knew that he should have gone. But he hadn't wanted to do it.

He'd lived so different a life, as Lucilla Sandle's guest. He'd always been accustomed to having a good deal of money to spend – it had irked him horribly that he had to bow to necessity and economise when he started his own business. But never before had he fully realised what life could mean when you had unlimited money at your disposal. And when the world knew that you had it.

Everywhere that Lucille Sandle went, life was made smooth for her. Deferential service was prompt to anticipate her wishes. She paid for it, of course – but she could afford to pay. Her own yacht lay at anchor in the harbour. The two cars she had brought with her stood in the hotel garage, ready to serve her, day or night, one chauffeur or the other always on duty. She had talked casually of running over to New York . . . perhaps on the *Hindenburg's* next trip.

And – while he'd been with her, he had shared all those pleasant things.

We've had a good time. And now you can run away and play with that little business of yours. Was that the rest of the story? The mere thought made him cold.

Go back to London, and that great white elephant of a showroom? Watch it eat the profits of his labours, while it flattered his vanity. Gamble, not with counters at baccarat, but with his wits against those of wealthier men and women, who might, if it pleased them, do business with him, and put a little of their money into his pocket. Go back to

the anxious scanning of sales figures, to Karen's cold common sense.

Karen. . . .

A curious glint showed in his eyes. She was a sweet thing – a devilish fascinating thing – and he'd meant every word he'd said about marrying her – when he'd said it. But that, of course, was only evidence of his insanity. She had a faculty of sending his blood racing through his veins, when she was near, a sort of virginal charm that made him want to take her in his arms. But – marry her ?

He'd kissed her a lot, of course. His mouth softened, as he remembered those kisses, and Lucilla Sandle, not guessing the cause of the softening, studied him with still more interest out of her dark, enigmatic eyes. But – kisses aren't compromising, in this year of grace. And there hadn't really been anything else between them, apart from a few foolish words.

Leaning over the table, his mind made up on the biggest gamble he'd undertaken yet, his mouth still curved tenderly, his eyes dark with meaning, he said softly :

"We've had a darned good time – so good that I wish it could go on for ever——"

Nothing much in that. A feeler only. See how she took it. His heart began to leap with excitement when he saw the dark lashes sweep down, saw the full red mouth curve.

"Ever's a long time, Steven. Besides – you've your business——"

"Hang the business ! " he said, with just the right effect of impulse. "Look here, Lucilla, I can't think about the business, when you're sitting there, looking so wonderful——"

He waited a moment. Gulped the last of his liqueur, and then suggested softly :

"Listen, 'Cilla. I want to make love to you – properly – and I can't do it here. What d'you say, we take a *fiacre* – one of those slow, old, horse-drawn things, and go for a

drive? On the coast road. There's a moon, and there'll be the sound of the sea. . . ."

And waited, breathlessly, for her reply. She could so easily, if she chose, laugh at him, tease him, keep him there, dancing and drinking cocktails, for the rest of the evening. For a long moment, the dark lashes veiled her eyes. Then she looked up slowly, her mouth curving, and his heart leapt in his breast with triumph.

"We might," she agreed casually. "It's stuffy in here, isn't it?"

His hands shook with excitement as he slipped the wrap round her bare white shoulders. So far, so good. . . .

They found their *fiacre*, and the bewhiskered old coachman grinned knowingly as he took Steven's instructions. Helping Lucilla in, Steven followed her, and the old horse clip-clopped off down the road. The air was soft, and the moon was full. The night was scented, and stars hung in the sky. Lucilla's wrap crumpled into a soft heap, as Steven took her in his arms.

She wasn't Karen, of course. She hadn't Karen's delicious youth, her beguiling softness. She lacked her lovely innocence of this game of love. But Lucilla had Sandle's Breweries, and there was about her a certain heady sophistication. Steven dropped a kiss on her throat, her shoulder, her parted lips . . . and his exultation grew at the passion of her response. Before they turned on the return journey, he could tell himself victoriously that he had won the biggest gamble of his life.

Only once had a tiny twinge of doubt and regret beset him - once when the lights of a passing car had flared up out of the darkness, to speed swiftly past . . . bringing a fleeting recollection of a moment on the Great West Road. when Karen had hidden her face against his shoulder. . . .

Next moment, the twinge was gone. It didn't even stir again when, on their return to the hotel, Lucilla said casually :

"Of course, darling, you can't carry on with that absurd

business of yours when we are married. Oddly enough, I had an enquiry this morning, from a solicitor called Hoskins, as to whether I'd like to sell my shares. . . ."

She could, she knew, have married Freddy Haxen, or Ian Foster. But Freddy wouldn't have forsaken his racing cars for her, or Ian the screen. Steven Hallett said lightly, gaily:

"Just as you like, my sweet!"



## CHAPTER XXIX

MOLLY WAS BUSY IN THE GARDEN. Very mildly busy, for a baby was on the way, and Jim had issued stern instructions about taking proper care of herself. A little hoeing and raking, if she liked, but nothing more strenuous. Presently she stood back, and surveyed the result of her labours with satisfaction. All the neighbours had nice gardens, too, but Molly and Jim thought theirs was the nicest.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was past eleven. Placidly obedient to her routine, she turned towards the house for the glass of milk and the biscuit she'd promised Jim she would have, smiling a little in tender derision at his solicitude. As if she wasn't as strong as a horse!

She had carried the milk into the pretty sitting-room, whose french windows opened on to the lawn at the back, when the front door-bell shrilled. Clamorously, urgently, as if someone in desperate need stood on the threshold. Undisturbed — for by now she had plenty of experience of the average errand boy's tactics, Molly went, unhurried, to answer it.

But it wasn't an errand boy, and her eyes flew open, her hands went out with a little instinctive gesture when she saw Karen on the threshold.

"Kay!"

"Hullo, Molly——" For all Karen's efforts to keep her voice even, normal, there was a shake in it. "Hope you don't mind my turning up at this unconventional hour, but——"

Her lips were beginning to tremble. All the way here, in the tube and the bus, she'd been fighting down emotion.

Battling determinedly against the humiliation of breaking down in public. Here, in Molly's house, her barriers were already beginning to crumble, and she was perilously near to tears.

Molly said :

"Don't be an idiot, Kay ! Here - into the sitting-room. What on earth is the matter ? "

Before Karen could answer, Molly fled hastily to ransack the dining-room sideboard. There was a bottle of Burgundy there, which Jim had brought her the night before. She poured out a glass, and went back to the sitting-room with it in her hand.

"Here," she said, "drink that ! You look as if you needed it, and I'm having my elevenses anyhow. Go on ! "

Gratefully, obediently, Karen sipped at the wine. Leant back in the armchair, against the pretty chintz of Molly's loose covers, breathing deeply. That one hysterical moment over, calmness seemed coming back to her. The tenseness which had possessed her relaxed a little. She looked at Molly as if she were really seeing her for the first time, and noticed the alarm in the wide, blue eyes. Leant forward, and tried, a little shakily, to laugh.

"I'm all right, really. I'm sorry if I gave you a fright. But I've had a bit of a shock this morning, and I had to see someone, talk to someone about it. And I didn't feel that I could talk to anyone but you."

"What is it, Kay ? " Molly's voice was steady enough, serene enough, but Karen's words had not reassured her. It wasn't like Kay to break down like this. Something had hurt her - hurt her badly.

That man . . . Molly thought, her instinctive mistrust of Steven Hallett waking again in her mind. Almost immediately, Karen confirmed her surmise.

"I heard from Steven this morning - he's been away on the Riviera for some weeks, with Mrs. Sandle. It was - a business trip, and he's done quite a lot, really. I never

dreamt - I was a fool, I suppose - and then this came this morning——"

Mutely she held out a crumpled piece of paper. She'd clutched it in her hand, all the way to Molly's, never needing to read it again after that first, horrible minute. Molly took it, unfolded the sheet, noted subconsciously the luxury hotel address at the top, and began to read :

"DEAR KAY, - By the time you get this, Lucilla Sandle and I will be married. . . ."

She stopped, and stared incredulously at Karen across the sheet.

"Lucilla Sandle - not the Mrs. Sandle who used to come to the salon?"

Kay nodded wearily.

"Yes. I forgot you didn't know. She took an interest in the business some time ago, and she always used to ask Steven out a lot. He" - her voice shook - "was always grumbling because she kept him dancing attendance on her."

"But," Molly said, "she must be old enough to be his mother!"

"Probably," Karen agreed with weary bitterness, "but - old man Sandle was a millionaire, wasn't he?"

The disillusionment in her voice stabbed at Molly's heart, and she was filled with a fierce anger against Steven Hallett for having hurt her so. Yet mingled with the rage was a small twinge of triumphant gladness. Bitter as the moment might be for Kay, wasn't it marvellous that she should have found Hallett out - in time? She said stoutly:

"Kay, I'm not going to pretend that I'm sorry. I don't mind telling you now that I never was happy about your engagement to that man. All that secrecy. . . . Anyhow, he's come out in his true colours, and when you get over the shock, you'll see what a lucky escape you've had."

Kay said slowly, unexpectedly:

"I've seen it already, Molly. Oh, I'm bruised and hurt in my self-esteem. But somehow, when that letter arrived this morning, and I read it and looked back - I began to see things clearly for the first time. It's funny, waking up suddenly to the fact that you've been a fool for months and months, and suddenly aren't a fool any longer. It's - awfully humiliating. . . ."

Her mouth was tense, and her eyes haunted.

When she'd read that letter, she seemed suddenly to have walked out of a mist - a rosy mist, maybe, but a cloud of delusion all the same - into the bright, uncompromising light of day. Had realised, all in a minute, that she had never really loved Steven Hallett. She'd been in love with a Steven who existed only in her imagination; she'd been infatuated, investing him with qualities he had never possessed, and - her cheeks burned - he had laid her under a physical spell with his kisses, his love-making.

To-day, for the first time, she had seen Steven Hallett as he really was. Treacherous, unstable, an opportunist. The thought made her say, slowly, with heartfelt sincerity:

"You're right, Molly. Thank Heaven this happened before it was too late."

Her eyes went back to the letter, and her mouth took a wry twist.

"That isn't the whole story, though. Read the rest of it."

Obediently, Molly went on. And as she read, her sense of relief waned. Her anger against Steven Hallett surged:

"I'm sorry to give the business up, of course, but Lucilla doesn't want me to carry on, and as we're off to California for six months or so, it would be rather foolish. Oddly enough, she had an enquiry as to whether she'd like to sell her shares recently, and when she said yes, we found out that the offer came from old Bamfield, so we've both sold out to him. Rather a joke, isn't it?"

Making a last effort to put me out of business, when I'd decided to throw it up, anyhow!

"The transfers arrived this morning, and go back, signed, by the same post as this letter. I expect he'll be getting in touch with you about taking the business over. And as, judging from your last letter, you were getting a bit fed up with it, I don't suppose you'll be at all sorry.

"Incidentally, the price he offered doesn't show twenty shillings in the pound, but give me a little time, and I'll wangle the difference out of Lucilla, so that you don't lose any of your money. I'm sure she wouldn't want you to suffer for your loyal service to me.

"I hope you get another job that you like, and that we'll meet again some time in the future. . . ."

Silent, choked, unable to speak for the moment, Molly stared at Karen. Then she burst out:

"Your loyal service to him! The rotten little hypocrite! What's that about the money, Kay?"

Kay had forgotten that Molly didn't know - and now it had all to be confessed. But Molly didn't exclaim or criticise. She only sat, very quiet, very pitiful, and listened.

"I thought - wasn't I a fool!" - Karen's voice was bitter - "that it was so wonderful to be able to do something for Steven and his business."

Molly said, slowly:

"So Bamfields are taking it over. What will that mean to you, Kay?"

Kay said, derisively:

"Steven knew - didn't you notice that? I'll be out of a job, of course - and there'll be a lot of people who'll find it very funny. Bamfield won't have any use for me - any more than he had for Steven. And I can't blame him."

"Why" - try as she would to keep her voice casual, Molly knew that there was an undertone of significance in it - "why not have a word with Barry Gage about that?"



She wasn't surprised when Karen shook her head. She knew Kay's independence of old. But she was aghast when the other girl said briefly :

"Never ! You see, Molly, he's responsible for part of this——" Her eyes flicked to the letter. "The business part. If Bamfields hadn't been ready to buy, Steven would either have had to close down, or carry on, and I think he might have decided to carry on. But Bamfield's offer came at the psychological moment. And Barry Gage was responsible for that."

"How?"

"My fault. I was a fool and thought I could trust him. I told him, some time ago, about Lucilla Sandle . . . let him guess that things weren't too good with the firm. And, of course, he must have told old Bamfield."

Her voice was quiet, level. Not even Molly should guess how it hurt her to come to that conclusion. Queer, but not even Steven's treatment of her had been able to stab so cruelly as the thought that Barry had let her down.

Molly was shaking her small, wise head.

"I don't believe it, Kay ! Barry isn't like that. He wouldn't do that sort of thing. . . ."

She hesitated, and then went on, her tone gathering conviction :

"He wouldn't do it, anyhow. And he'd never do it to you, of all people, because he's crazy about you."

Karen said, a little bitterly :

"Can't you see, Molly - that would only be one more reason? He's never approved of my being a business woman. He thought it was all wrong of Steven to give me so much responsibility, so much authority. And this, I suppose, was a chance to prove it."

For a brief moment, Molly's allegiance to Barry Gage wavered. And then his face rose before her, his pleasant, plain face, with its firm mouth, its reliable chin, its steady eyes. He wouldn't - not in a thousand years - have done a thing like this to Karen. It might look like it now, but

after all, Kay was only jumping to conclusions. When the truth came out, Molly was sure she'd find she'd been wrong. She said so, staunchly. And for a moment the two girls sat looking at one another. At last Karen said, shaken :

"Perhaps . . ."

And then a hint of panic shot into her eyes. Molly noticed it, but was too wise to ask her, in her present wrought-up state, what had caused it. She never dreamt what the reason might be.

Karen had found that letter from Steven in the mail that morning, waiting for her on her desk. The envelope had been fatter than his envelopes had been for some time, and she had set it on one side with a little sense of excitement. Was this an answer to her letter, telling him that she was worried, had too much to do? Was he coming home at last?

She'd dealt with the rest of the correspondence, as she always did. She'd seen the salesmen, and the mechanics, and had satisfied herself that the machine was in motion, for the day's work. And then, dismissing her typist, she had shut herself up in her own office to open Steven's letter.

She'd been grateful for that afterwards. Grateful that she hadn't ripped it open and read it at once, with the curious eyes of the staff upon her.

She couldn't have borne that - to have read that news, so callously indifferently delivered - in front of an audience. She knew well enough that they'd whispered and gossiped about herself and Steven. And now they'd know, any minute, that he had married Lucilla Sandle, and wasn't even coming back.

Then had come the further shock - the sale of the business - bringing her last hope, her last dream, shattering about her ears. So black a wave of depression had swept over her as she reached the end of his letter, that she had only one thought in her mind - escape. Get away from the office every corner of which was haunted by some humiliating remembrance of Steven.

Because she had dreaded going back alone to the empty flat, her thoughts had flown at once to Molly. So that she had simply walked out, leaving the surprised staff with a brief, inexplicit message to expect her back when they saw her, and had taken the tube to Molly's suburb.

But - before she had left the office, it had leapt into her frantic mind that Barry Gage was responsible for everything. And that had been the last, most mortal blow. Without stopping to think, she had sat down to her desk, holding her pen in hands that trembled, to write him a letter.

A beastly letter. Accusing him of treachery, of leading her on to give him her confidence, and then betraying her trust. "I suppose you'll be pleased, now," she had written; "you never approved of my being a business woman, and you've put me out of business." The last thing she did before leaving was to give the letter into the hands of one of the cleaners, with strict instructions that it was to be delivered to Mr. Gage at Bamfields without delay. It would be in his hands by now.

Watching her keenly, Molly was dismayed at the new despair that filled her eyes. She rose quickly, and without asking any more questions, put her arm round the other girl's shoulders.

"Listen, Kay. You're all worked-up and nervy, and no wonder. You're coming up to the spare room with me, and I'm going to tuck you up with a sedative. And you're going to try and sleep."

Karen tried to protest, but Molly refused to listen.

"The office will get on well enough without you for one day - it doesn't matter now, anyhow! And you're going to stay the night. I'll ring Louise and let her know that you're here, so that she won't expect you back."

Her alarm subsided a little, as Karen submissively gave in. Went up, obediently enough, to the spare room, and let Molly tuck her up on the pretty bed. Swallowed the strong sedative which Molly mixed for her, and, after lying

silent for a while, with her arms behind her head, staring with wide unhappy eyes at the ceiling, dropped into an uneasy sleep of utter exhaustion.

Once she was satisfied that the sleep was real, Molly tiptoed downstairs and ran out to the nearest telephone-box to call Louise. Gave her a brief explanation, and rang off. Hesitated for a moment. . . .

Should she ring Barry, and tell him what had happened? With quick decision she dropped two more pennies in the box, and dialled Bamfields' number.

But Barry was out, and though they told her where she might find him, she had no more pennies. Also, worried as she was about Kay, she didn't want to leave her alone in the house so much longer, while she went in search of change.

She'd ring him to-morrow, instead, she decided. It wouldn't make very much difference.

## CHAPTER XXX

LOUISE SAID, with a convincing show of distress :

" No, Barry - she isn't here, and I don't know where she is. I only got a message to say that she wouldn't be home."

She hesitated, her guileless eyes on his face, her mind working busily.

It looked, darn it, as if everything were up with the scheme she had cherished so dearly. Karen, jilted by Steven Hallett, was sure to fall into Barry Gage's arms on the rebound, and her own plan to marry him would just fade into thin air. And, thought Louise, never guessing that a longing to keep in touch with Karen had prompted Barry's friendship for herself, everything had been going so well. Inwardly, she cursed Steven Hallett. He needn't, at least, have been in such a hurry. . . .

A tempting idea shot into her mind.

Kay - proud, independent Kay - mightn't she react in the way that would best suit Louise if she and Barry could be kept apart, for a while at least? Even if her distress over Steven might, at this moment, have sent her into Barry's arms, even a few days might alter that. And - if she didn't hear from him at once?

But Barry knew of Molly and the close friendship between the two girls. And he'd been out to Molly's place. Wasn't it likely that would be the very next thing he'd try? She said, sparring for time :

" You - I take it you know what's happened? "

Of course he had or she wouldn't have found him there, on the doorstep, on her return from the salon, clamouring for news of Karen and her whereabouts.



"I do," he said grimly, and his jaw set ominously. An inspiration flashed into Louise's mind.

"Well - I wondered - I don't know - but it's possible——"

"What?" he demanded bluntly, impatient of her hesitation.

"Well, Mr. Hallett's on the Riviera, isn't he? I couldn't help wondering if Kay had gone over there——"

Barry thought rapidly. Was it possible?

She wouldn't have gone, he felt sure - she was too proud - to try and get Steven back. It was too late for that, anyhow. But she might have gone, not knowing perhaps, that it was too late for that, too, to try and persuade him not to part with the business. That would have been quite like Kay. He nodded decisively, and a gleam of determination showed in his eyes.

"You may be right," he said briefly, "d'you know where Hallett is staying?"

Louise did. There was a certain bundle of letters in Karen's dressing-table drawer - but she didn't mention the source of her information to Barry Gage. She saw him note down the address with inward satisfaction. Let him go haring off on a wild goose chase - it would keep him out of Kay's way for a time, at least.

With inward resentment she noted his eagerness to be off. Only, carefully, discreetly, as he ran down the stairs two at a time, she leant over the banisters to call after him:

"Mind you, Barry, it's only a guess of mine. I don't know."

. . . . .

Old Bamfield said drily, waving aside the papers which Karen wanted to lay before him.

"I don't bother with that sort of thing, Miss Winter. I leave it to my accountants. They'll have a man here this afternoon, and perhaps you'll be good enough to show him

anything he wants to know. I'd just like to have particulars of your stock - we'll have to shift it as soon as possible. I'm not going to keep this place on any longer than I can help."

Karen's heavy heart sank still further. She had been trying to buoy herself up with the hope that old Bamfield might be planning to carry on Hallett Car Sales as a separate business; that he might leave her, if not in charge, at least in some sort of a job, since no one could deny that she had the whole working of the concern at her finger-tips. Now even that hope was gone.

She said dully, with a certain valiant dignity.

"Certainly, Mr. Bamfield."

He studied her shrewdly. She'd got pluck, all right. She'd taken a stiff beating, and was keeping her chin up. Maybe young Gage wasn't quite such a fool, after all.

"I understand," he said suddenly, "that you've got some shares in this concern. You can hang on to them, of course, if you like, but I don't advise you to. There aren't going to be any dividends. I'll buy 'em from you - at the price you paid."

She looked up, startled at his unexpected generosity.

"Oh," she said faintly, "I couldn't——"

"Don't be a fool, my girl," he said gruffly, "you take your money, and thank your lucky stars I'm in a generous mood to-day. You'd better not be too independent. You'll be out of a job, and you may need all you can get."

Her last, lingering hope was dead. She said, in a low voice, angry to know that tears were gathering in her eyes, valiantly swallowing the bitterness of her humiliation:

"I wondered - perhaps you might need another typist - on your staff? I'm a good typist, Mr. Bamfield, and I know something about the motor trade by now."

He, in his turn, was angry to realise how nearly her appeal moved him to what he would have considered folly. He shook his head, rapidly, abruptly:

"Afraid not, Miss Winter. I'm sorry, but " - he stopped,

as a Machiavellian idea shot into his mind - "I leave all that sort of thing to my Sales Manager, Mr. Gage. I think you know him."

With inward satisfaction he watched the slow colour that surged into her face. She said, in a voice that was almost a whisper :

"Yes, I know him."

Then, with a last desperate drawing on her stock of courage, she forced herself to raise her head, to look old Bamfield straight in the eyes.

"Mr. Bamfield, might I ask you something?"

"Go ahead!" he invited.

"Did Mr. Gage tell you anything about the affairs of this firm? I mean, about Mrs. Sandle's interest——?"

Breathlessly, she waited. He eyed her, frowning, for a long moment before he replied. And then her heart, her heavy heart, leapt suddenly, for his words were convincing, if brutal:

"He did not! Only a fool would think that sort of thing of Gage. I did discover - through a word the bank manager let drop - that he'd been backing you up in that quarter, and I hauled him over the coals properly for it, miss, I can assure you! But as for telling me anything about your company - not a word. It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that all this sort of thing is on record at Somerset House, and that I had only to tell my solicitor to make some enquiries, when the matter interested me."

It didn't need a man as shrewd as old Bamfield to see what had happened. The girl had confided - Lord knows what - in young Gage, and she thought young Gage had given her away. Little fool! He hoped the lad would make her eat humble pie when he got back from the mysterious "urgent private business" he'd telephoned about last night. Meanwhile - let her stew in her own juice for a bit! He said, heavily:

"I'll tell Mr. Gage you're on the lookout for a job. If

he knows of anything, he'll probably get in touch with you."

With which he turned and stumped contemptuously out of the showroom of Hallett Car Sales Limited.

. . . . .

Karen had imagined, dimly, that it would take a matter of weeks to wind up the affairs of the firm. She was amazed to find them all taken out of her hands, courteously but firmly, in twenty-four hours. She hadn't reckoned with the efficiency with which Bamfields and everyone connected with Bamfields worked.

She was glad, in a way. It was a heartrending business, seeing everything she had worked and struggled so hard to build up, melt away. Even before she walked out of the showroom for the last time, workmen had hauled down the proud sign which had read "Hallett Car Sales Ltd." and were busy replacing it with one which announced Bamfield's ownership of the concern.

She had said, tentatively, to the representative Bamfield had sent over to take charge:

"You don't really need me any more, do you?"

Had been half glad, half miserable, to hear his almost absent:

"No, I don't think so, Miss Winter."

"Then," she had said, trying to keep her voice casual, "I'll pack up. I've one personal letter to write before I go, that's all. . . ."

She had delayed writing that letter, because she had felt so sure that Barry, as Bamfields' Sales Manager, would come over to take charge. She didn't know that he was on leave, and she'd thought that when she saw him, she could apologise and explain—that it would be so much easier than writing. But now——

She sat down to her desk, for the second time in two days, to write to him. Very differently, very contritely, this time.

Even in forty-eight hours, she had been able to do a lot of clear thinking. Looking back, she could see how right he had always been. How desperately he had tried to save her from her own folly. How kindly, how patiently, he had stood by.

Her sore heart had ached a little less whenever she thought of him. Humbly, she had wondered if he could forgive her . . . and yet, it seemed foolish to wonder anything of the sort where Barry was concerned. It wasn't in him to do anything else. If it were possible that he could still love her, after the way she had treated him. Searching her own heart honestly, she knew that if he did a whole lifetime wouldn't be enough for her to make up to him for her behaviour . . . a whole lifetime wouldn't be long enough to repay his love.

It had hurt, a little, that he hadn't come near her even in friendship since the disaster had fallen upon her . . . he must know all about it, since he was so much in Bamfield's confidence, and since the news of Lucilla Sandle's marriage to Steven Hallett had been published in all the papers, which found an incredible amount of space, in a dull period, for the second wedding of the brewery millionairess. But, of course, he'd been staying away because of that horrible letter. You couldn't expect even Barry to overlook that.

That, at least, she could put right. Even if she had lost his love, surely she could keep his friendship. Shortly, very humbly, she apologised for her mistake. "I was crazy," she wrote, "forgive me, Barry !"

Sealed it. Stamped it. Sent it off. Gathered her belongings together, took her last look at the place where she had been so madly happy, so incredibly miserable, and walked out for the last time. And even as she sat in the tube on her way to Molly's, she felt her heart lightening a little, felt hope stirring within her.

It had been arranged that she should not go back to the flat just yet. Molly had urged her to come and occupy the



spare room for a week or two at least, as a sort of holiday, until she should have rested a little, got over the after-effects of weeks of work and worry, and recovered from the shocks of the last few days. Jim had warmly seconded the invitation. Karen had accepted gratefully.

Louise, she thought, unaware of the fair girl's treachery, was a decent sort, but — she wasn't Molly. Wasn't so comforting, wasn't so sanely kind, or so understanding. She'd stay with Molly and Jim, and potter about in the garden with them, and do some knitting for Molly's baby, and rest and try to eat, and try to recover her balance.

Presently, of course, she would have to consider the future, but she couldn't face it yet. And besides, deep down in her secret heart, there burned the small, half ashamed hope that Barry would have something to say to her about that future.

## CHAPTER XXXI

IT WASN'T UNTIL THREE DAYS HAD DRIFTED, slowly, painfully away and brought no word at all from Barry Gage, that the small hope began to die, and wounded pride began to take its place in her heart.

If he had still cared, he wouldn't have let all this time go by, without getting in touch with her. Even if he still cared for her as a friend only. His prolonged silence could only mean one thing.

He'd been angry over her first letter. And then, when the second reached him, he hadn't believed it. He'd thought... her cheeks burned painfully at the idea... that because Steven Hallett had jilted her, she was trying to turn to him.

Well - that was true enough, she reminded herself with painful honesty, even if it could have been put less harshly. Unknown to herself, she had all along cared more deeply for Barry than she had realised. But it had taken Steven's brutality to waken her out of the daze into which he had thrown her. To show her that all the time, in spite of her infatuation for Steven, she had loved Barry, with a love that was deep and real, and that had never - save on that one tragic occasion - wavered in its trust.

She *had* turned to him - and he had turned his back. You couldn't put any other interpretation on his silence.

Karen thought drearily, with a bitter self-condemnation, I've only myself to blame.

She began to remember how, recently, he had not asked her to go out with him and Louise. How often he had been at the flat when she wasn't there. Was it possible - could her crazy, lightly-conceived idea have come to something, and her throwing of Louise and Barry together

have brought about the end she had foolishly planned?

Had she lost him - to Louise?

What did it matter? It was plain that she had lost him. They'd meet again, some time, she supposed. And she'd keep her chin up, and accept any friendship he could still offer her, lightly, casually. He should never be able to feel, quite certainly, that she had once been ready to creep into his arms.

Meantime, the future was still to be faced, and she was appalled to realise how little courage she was yet able to bring to the business.

Molly watched her, anxiously. She had never seen Karen like this before. Utterly beaten, completely listless. Even Jim, who was genuinely very fond of Kay, in a brotherly way, worried a little. But Molly clung to the hope that everything would still come right with Barry Gage. When no word came from him, she wanted to ring Bamfields up, but when she even suggested it, Karen implored her not to.

"If you do," she said, "I shall run away! I can't stand it, Molly. Give me a little time, and I'll pull myself together. But - you mustn't ring him up. He's ignored both of my letters. Isn't that enough?"

And Jim said privately:

"I should leave it alone, Moll, if I were you. I know the fellow used to be keen on her, but there aren't many men who'll go on caring for a girl who treats them as Kay treated him."

Reluctantly, Molly gave up the idea. Contented herself with trying to nurse Kay back to mental and physical health. And another day dragged by.

And then Barry turned up.

They were all in the dining-room. Dinner was finished, and Molly's fragrant coffee was on the table, when the gate clicked, and looking up, they could see him walking up the garden path. With a swift glance at Molly, Jim rose, and went to answer the door. Karen clutched at the other girl's arm.

"Don't leave me, Molly!"

Molly's lashes flickered down. Her natural optimism had soared at the sight of Barry's broad shoulders and kindly face. She wasn't going to give Kay any rash promises. If things showed signs of turning out the way that she hoped they would. . . .

And then Jim was ushering Barry in. There was a little bustle of greetings, of finding him a cup, and pouring out coffee for him. And then, when he had sat down, a little silence seemed to fall on the room.

Only for a moment. Easily, quietly, as if there were nothing strange in the atmosphere, Barry began to chat with Jim, and under his deft guidance, conversation grew and rolled along, and the tension slackened. Only Kay sat rather silent, eyes cast down.

Barry's face was entirely non-committal, but observant Molly saw how often his eyes strayed to Karen's pale cheeks. In spite of Karen's appeal, she determined that he should have the chance to speak alone to the other girl which he so obviously wanted. And so, when she had collected the coffee cups and carried them out to the kitchen, she called loudly for Jim. Unsuspecting, not noticing the glance of appeal which Karen shot at him, he rose obediently and followed his spouse, who immediately dragged him into the kitchen, and firmly shut the door.

Left alone together, both Barry and Karen were silent for a minute. Then he said gently:

"I was - awfully sorry to hear about everything, Kay."

She mastered her lips, which threatened to tremble. Managed to say, lightly enough:

"Yes. It was all rather a shock, Barry. And - my career as a business woman's had a bit of a set-back. But I'll get over it."

It was a relief to know that she had managed to get some sort of confidence into those last words. She said, rallying all her resources:

"I suppose there are other jobs in the world, which will give me some sort of a chance again. . . ."

His face was expressionless. She added, with a sort of defiant bravery :

"And, by the way, I'm sorry I wrote you that crazy letter. I hope you got my apology."

He said, gravely :

"I got them both together. To-night. I've been away."

The full force of his words took a second to reach her. When it did, her heart gave a sickening lurch. He'd been away. He hadn't just been staying away from her.

He said :

"I had some urgent business - abroad. As a matter of fact, it kept me longer than I thought it would."

Karen said :

"Oh !"

Rather faintly. And looked down. Heard him say, very kindly, very levelly :

"I believe - the Old Man suggested I might be able to do something about a job——"

So that was that. He didn't hate her for that beastly letter. He still liked her, was still ready to help her. But - he didn't care any more. It took the last ounce of courage she possessed to raise her head and look him straight in the eyes.

"He did - but, of course, you mustn't bother."

"As a matter of fact," he said quietly, his eyes on her pale face, "I only know of one at the moment——"

He was smiling now, and his eyes were very tender. Karen had dropped her lashes, and didn't see. She had heard only his words. He knew of a job. . . .

"Want to know what it is?" he asked.

He knew of a job. He was being - kind, and she ought to be grateful. Without looking up, she said in a whisper :

"Yes. . . ."

There was a little, scraping noise as he pushed his chair back, and came over towards her. Startled, she raised her head, to find him very close, to find him taking her hands.



"Only the same old job I've always wanted you to take Kay!" he said, gathering her into his arms. "Are you going to turn it down again?"

She knew now, and a sense of complete happiness swept over her as she nestled willingly enough against his shoulder. But - she had to hear him say it.

"What job, Barry?"

"Being Mrs. Barry Gage!" he told her, a little more sober, now that he could feel her heart beating against his breast. "Will you, my sweet?"

She didn't say anything - she couldn't. But she lifted her head and looked at him, and for a moment, he was almost dazed by the glory of all the things he read in her eyes. And then his mouth was on hers, hungry, but very tender. . . .

"I thought . . ." she said presently, in a whisper, "that you didn't want me. When I never heard. . . . I didn't know that you were away. . . ."

He smiled, and glanced down with a certain grim satisfaction at a pair of badly bruised knuckles. Maybe, one of these days, he'd tell her just where he had been.

He grinned slightly, at the brief recollection of those hectic days he had spent in France. Saw again Steven Hallett, as they had met at Steven Hallett's hotel, very arrogant, very handsome, in immaculate evening kit, with Lucilla Sandle behind him, blazing with diamonds. Heard again the sneer which had underlain Hallett's reply to his enquiry for news of Kay. Heard the satisfying smash of his fist on Steven's jaw. . . .

One of these days he might tell Kay. Let her know how formalities with the French police had delayed his return to her. But - that would keep.

It was enough, for the moment, that she was here in his arms, and that her mouth was his, willingly, for the taking.

THE END

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